

Am I an Activist?

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When Dr. Paul Salem, former Director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, called me shortly before the 1996 parliamentary elections to ask if I was ready to write a study on the participation of Lebanese women in politics, my first reaction was, "Paul, I am no woman activist. You know that." He laughed and said, "That's why I'm calling you. I want an objective view."

I asked myself why such a request generated this reaction on my part. I found the answer in the way I was brought up as a child, the personal experiences I had during my adulthood, especially as a student at the Lebanese University in the early seventies when it was the hub of political activism, and a personal definition and understanding of activism resulting from those personal experiences. This answer, however, came later – after conducting extensive research on women's participation in politics. But at the time Dr. Salem made his request I had no interest whatsoever in the topic and used to believe that those involved in activities – including research – demanding gender equality were mostly women who had suffered discrimination at a certain stage in their lives or careers, and even worse were those with an inferiority complex. Was I naïve? Maybe. But here is a brief account of the reasons behind this.

Being the youngest in a family of nine children, eight girls and a boy who ranked second in the count, I never felt discriminated against, nor, at least to my knowledge, did any of my sisters. I remember the days, when as a kid, I used to bring home my report card for my parents' signature and my father refusing to give it back to me on the same day. He used to say, "No, you can't return it tomorrow. I have to take it to the bank first and cash it." He made me believe that by being the first in my class I was contributing to the family earnings. He never failed to give me my share of the hard earned cash. Besides building my self-dependence, this simple fatherly behavior taught me at an early age that the well-being of the family is the responsibility of all its members with no discrimination between males and females, neither in rights nor in duties. It also taught me to judge people by their achievements and personality.

Throughout my years as a university student and professor, both in Lebanon and abroad, I did not witness any experiences of gender discrimination. A few incidents, however, did involve unsuccessful attempts at discrimination on the basis of sect or national origin. This, coupled with the succession of events in Lebanon during the seventies and eighties made me more concerned with broader political and national issues than with issues of gender discrimination. The mediums I chose to work through were first and foremost teaching and research. Although I did participate in conferences and workshops, organize, lecture at, and join in sit-ins, work with

some politicians as a member of unofficial advisory or support teams, my participation was sporadic, more a response to calls from others for my services, rather than being, except in a few cases, a result of personal initiative.

Did all that make an activist out of me then? While some may say yes, I refused to be termed an activist due to a certain personal perception of activism inscribed in my head during my years as a student at the Faculty of Law, involving the use of direct confrontational actions and being synonymous with protest and dissent.

Since that first study on the participation of Lebanese women in politics in 1996, most of my research has centered on this topic and related issues. With this drastic shift in my research interests, from international politics mainly, to women's issues, friends and colleagues were wondering whether I had turned into a women's activist. But for reasons very much different from those mentioned above this term doesn't seem to fit me either.

Not only did my research on the topic over the last decade increase my interest in it and lead me to reconsider some of my earlier positions, especially that regarding the call for a quota for women in elected and appointed public office, it also made me look back at many earlier experiences from a different perspective. The end result was that many of what I used to consider simple aspects or manifestations of natural human relations or problems with a person's personality and character appeared to be the result of a deep-rooted patriarchal, gender discriminatory culture that has to be changed and with it all the laws that consecrate it. How can I contribute to this change? My choice of mediums stayed the same with a small addition: Gender equality, feminist ideology, and related issues became integral parts of some of the courses I teach.

In-depth interviews with women candidates in successive parliamentary and municipal elections (1953-2005) were a major method I used to collect data for my published works on the topic. In an interview conducted with MP. Mrs. Nayla Mouawad in 1996, she asked me if I was a member of any NGO or civil society association, a question raised later by many of the interviewees. The conversation that followed my negative answer made me recognize how far I was from being an activist. The more women candidates I interviewed and the more local and regional conferences I attended, the more jealous I became of those women for having something I still lack: the drive, devotion, and long-term commitment.

Finally, the more I learn about the works of famous Lebanese and Arab women activists the longer I see my road towards activism.