



File

File

File

## The Role of LAU in Empowering Women: A Personal Experience

Anita Farah Nassar has been affiliated with the Lebanese American University (LAU) since 1965, and throughout those 37 years, she has served LAU diligently. After graduating from the Beirut College for Women (currently LAU) in 1969 with a Bachelor degree, she worked at the nursery school then later joined the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) as Program Coordinator and was later promoted to Program Officer. She also received her Masters degree from this same institution after it became a full-fledged university. She currently serves as the Assistant Director of IWSAW. Given that this issue of *Al-Raida* investigates the role of higher education in empowering Arab women, here is what Nassar had to say about her university years.

### 1. How do you assess your university education? What was distinctive about your university years?

My university years were very enriching. During my college years, things were very different. Unlike nowadays, we didn't have much choice in terms of universities to attend and majors to select. The only two institutions that were available for English speaking students were the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Beirut College for Women (BCW). I opted for BCW because I wanted to experience the family-like atmosphere for which BCW was well reputed. Because BCW was an all girls' college that was small in size and student body, new students were very well taken care of. For instance, every three new students were assigned a senior student that we called "older sister". Among the duties of the "older sister" was to assist new students during the orientation period organized by the college. These "older sisters" toured the campus with us to help us find our way around. They also escorted us while we received proper advising and helped us with our registration. The "older sister" phenomenon was viable then, but I realize the impossibility of implementing it nowadays since the student body at LAU is over 6,000. Although the new electronic system of course registration serves the ever-increasing student body, it lessens the interaction between the students, their advisors and the administration.

Even though we were pampered as students, we had very demanding professors that urged us to work hard in

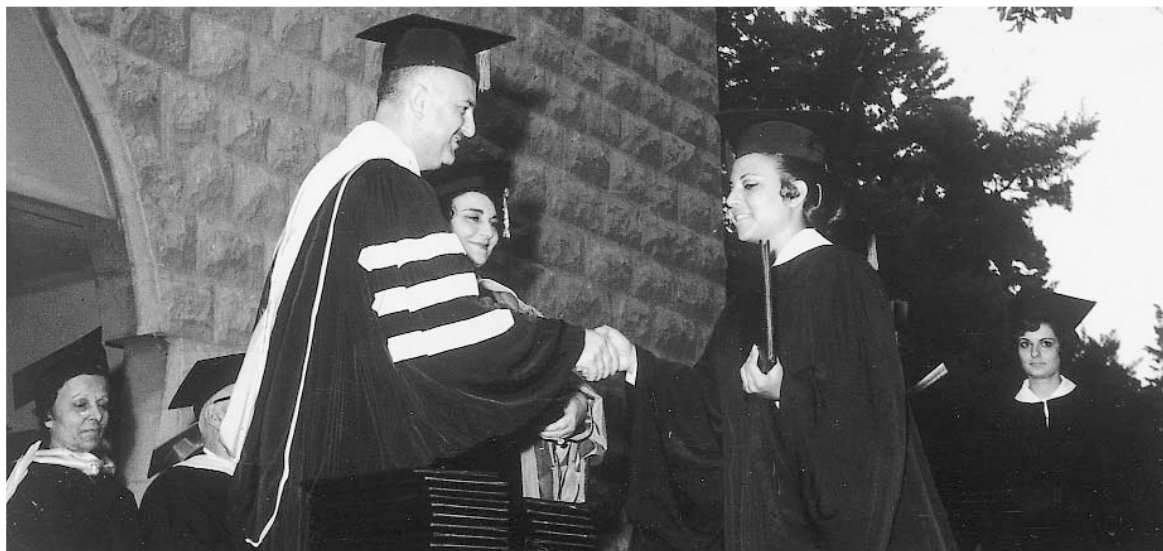


Anita Farah Nassar

order to receive our degrees. My professors were my mentors. They played a major role in shaping my personality. They also instilled in me the leadership skills needed to succeed in my career. They molded me into what I am today. They believed in me, taught me everything I needed to know, and encouraged me to grow.

The administration and teaching body worked incessantly to provide us with the best possible education. Moreover, they assisted us in finding suitable jobs. I have to admit that the very challenging job offers I received were because of my university education. When the American Community School (ACS) hired me, I was the only Arab teaching there. Back then they only employed American citizens. Despite the fact that I was working in a school that applied all the new educational methodologies, I never felt at a disadvantage. I rose to the challenge and felt very confident given that I was very well prepared at BCW. There was nothing discussed or applied in early child education or elementary education that I didn't know.

One very important prerequisite for graduating at the time was that students had to complete 120 hours of community service. We were required to volunteer either in an orphanage or in a retirement home or read for the blind. This, I believe, was very essential for very many reasons. It helped develop our sense of altruism where we



Anita Farah Nassar receiving her degree from Dr. Raja T. Nasr and Dr. Marie Aziz Sabri, Acting President of Beirut College for Women

learned the importance of helping others. It also served to build our personalities and made us feel more responsible and needed. Moreover, it taught us the importance of solidarity. The fact that we interacted with, and were helping people who were less fortunate than we were gave us a sense of worth. We felt like we were making a difference and the fact that people depended on us made us feel very useful. It is a shame that community service is no longer a university requirement. I think it ought to be reintroduced given that it helps spread tolerance and social awareness.

## **2. How empowered did you feel after earning your degrees?**

Given that I am an educator, I value education greatly and believe that it is the most important element that leads to empowerment. If I am to answer this question it is important for me to define an empowered person. An empowered person is someone who has "power-over" the decisions that impact his or her life. So when we talk about education, I believe it is bound to empower women simply because it allows people to gain control of their lives.

Studying and working in an institution that strives to empower women by educating them and encouraging them to reach decision-making positions affected me greatly. Moreover, being part of the university that founded one of the first women's institutes in the region made me value the importance of women's empowerment. Besides, working at IWSAW in my capacity as Program Coordinator and later Program Officer allowed me to empower women by implementing the various development projects IWSAW runs, namely the Income-generating Project, the Prison Project, the Basic Living Skills Project and the Literacy Project. Thanks to these projects,

marginalized women are being armed with the tools needed to create healthier lives for themselves, their families, and their community. Moreover, these projects help in improving the familial and economic situation as well as the lifestyle of these marginalized women.

Thanks to my university education and because of the fact that I was introduced to community service at an early stage, I was able to become a trainer and later a trainer of trainers. In my capacity as trainer of trainers, I work closely with social workers and train them on how to develop the creativity and skills of marginalized women. I also train schoolteachers on ongoing professional development and here my graduate work as well as my work experience has helped me prepare the workshops and develop the appropriate material and tools for ongoing education. It is important to note that IWSAW's Income-generating Project enabled women to find productive alternatives within their households. It also assisted women prisoners earn an income and made them feel useful.

One last point I would like to add here is that my work at IWSAW on educational and developmental projects for children and women facilitated my joining the graduate program. So I believe that my university education and work experience have helped me greatly. They shaped my personality and molded me into the person I am today.

## **3. Is there anything you would like to add?**

Had it not been for my husband and children I wouldn't be where I am today. They were and still are a tremendous support. The nature of my work requires a lot of dedication and hard work on my part and they are always there to lend a helping hand.

Interviewed by Myriam Sfeir