

Mary Turner Lane Award

The Mary Turner Lane Award is a student paper competition established in honor of the late Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women's studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The competition is open to any currently enrolled female LAU student. The award, consisting of \$500 and a certificate, will go to the best research paper on women/gender studies or original piece of writing such as personal or argumentative essay, (possibly but not necessarily) completed as one of the requirements of a class taken at LAU (literature, language, social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy, education etc.). Below are the two winning papers (2012).

Winning Graduate Research Paper

Women in Lebanese Politics: Discourse and Action

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This research paper aims at addressing the issue of why women have limited leadership and representative roles in Lebanese politics, and why so few actually run for parliament. Due to time and resource constraints, our research does not aim to perform a comprehensive analysis of the problem, but rather to examine a few connected questions related to the problem. The main task in this research paper is to identify the constraints and factors preventing women from participating in political life in Lebanon (joining parties and running for parliamentary elections). We focused on the opinions of female politicians and female political science students in Lebanon regarding what they see as the greatest obstacle that women face when pursuing political careers. The purpose of our research is not to present an all-inclusive study, but rather to offer updated insights into what continues to prevent women from political participation in Lebanon.

We conducted four interviews: one with a female member of the Marada Movement (Vera Yammine), one with Lebanese Phalange/Kataeb (Rachel Moufarrej), one with Future Movement (Raya Al Hassan), and one with an employee at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants (Mira Daher Violides) respectively. We chose these specific parties for two reasons. The first is that we have contacts within these parties, and the second is that these contacts are in a position to answer the questions addressed to them. We tried to approach Rima Fakhry of Hezbollah but she refused to give us an interview on the grounds that the party is not currently conducting interviews on this issue. We realize that the limited scope of our methodology prevents us from a full understanding of the issues we deal with and that it may cause us to reach incomplete and inconclusive conclusions. We deal with these limitations by our

assertion that this project is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to add further data to research that has already been conducted. We also want to clarify from the start that although we will be citing scholarly interpretations of factors constraining women's political participation, we will mostly be focusing on the opinions of the women we interviewed and surveyed on this matter.

We also conducted 20 surveys of female political science university students at the Lebanese American University. We have chosen this university because members of our group are attending it. We limited our research to female political science majors (either in MA or BA programs) because we decided that this is the best population to look into in order to find out whether or not female political science students aim to pursue political careers or run for parliament. Again, we understand the limitations of our research in choosing such a small, convenience sample from a selected university, and restate that the intention of this research is only to add some qualitative data to the overall, existing research on the subject.

Our research also analyzed the statistics that non-governmental organizations have conducted on this issue, as well as the information provided by the websites and marketing materials of the parties themselves. The non-governmental organizations we specified for our research are the Lebanese Women's Council and the non-governmental National Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues. We chose these specific organizations because they deal with the issue of women's political involvement and participation in Lebanon. Some, such as the non-governmental National Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues, conduct shadow reports following sessions of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). We decided to use these resources to extend the scope of our analysis beyond the above mentioned three parties, and include all other political parties in Lebanon. The data we collected from non-governmental organizations and the political parties will also allow us to compare the results with the answers that we received from our interviewees.

Literature Review

Women in Lebanon were given the right to vote and run for parliament in 1952. However, 60 years have passed since and they are still represented poorly in decision-making positions. After an absence of 30 years from the parliament (from 1962 to 1992), three women were elected for a parliament composed of 128 MPs, earning 2.3 percent of the total number of seats (Abu Zayd, 2002). During the last elections of 2009, the number increased from three to four women deputies. But the core problem is that women, for some reason, do not run for the elections. Only 12 women ran for parliament in 2009, making the success rate 25 percent. In 1998, the Lebanese Women's Council organized a conference to address the paucity of women's political participation, and together with various NGOs they produced policy recommendations to the government (Freedom House Lebanon report, 2012). The recommendations included the implementation of a gender quota, but nothing has been done by the government to address any of the demands of this conference.

A combination of political, social, and economic reasons provide an explanation to the obstacles faced by women who want to participate in political activities. In order

to run for any kind of elections, candidates must have the financial means to advance their candidacy and promote themselves. In Lebanon, the financing is either provided by the candidate herself or the political party she represents. As political parties do not include women on their candidates' lists, few women have the means to finance their campaigns and run on their own (Abu Zayd, 2002). Moreover, the financing doesn't stop when a candidate is elected. As parliamentarians in Lebanon provide social services to their electorate, more financing is needed for a woman parliamentarian to be able to complete her term at the office.

According to a study conducted by the Centre for Research and Training in Development (CRTD-A, 2003), women's participation at the highest levels of decision making among six of the major parties in Lebanon, did not exceed ten per cent. The study further indicates that some women question the internal democracy of the political parties they belong to and complain that gender inequality prevails in different kinds of party activities.

The Future Movement, the Marada Party and the Amal Movement are considered to be among the largest and most influential parties in Lebanon. The Manifesto of the Future Movement contains several articles concerning the role of women in the movement and in Lebanese public and political life in general:

Allowing women to participate fully in development, particularly in political, economic and cultural life, requires legal and administrative measures that encourage this participation. These include a modification of organizational and labor and social security laws which can lead to granting women the same access as men to political and administrative positions, improving their representation in parliament and the executive branch of government, and reserving a female quota to promote the political participation of women.

Vera Yammine, a member of the Marada Political Bureau, is one of the few female politicians in Lebanon who frequently represent the party through press releases and political talk shows. On the website of the party, there is a testimony by a female party member saying that women in the Marada party are present in all sectors: In activities, in committees, in the media, etc. According to the female party member, women are treated in the same way as men are, which has encouraged her to choose the Marada in particular (Women's presence in Marada is inclusive, Tony Gebrael Frangiyyeh, 2012).

Analysis

State System, Political Culture, and Legislative Explanations

The confessional composition of the Lebanese political system coupled with 30 years of civil war have "resulted in a political arena that is almost exclusively dominated by a small population of elite families" (Freedom House Lebanon report, 2012). Although it has been acknowledged that "prior to the war, women were quite active in the political parties, and even during the war certain parties specifically sought women's participation," the conflicts in Lebanon made politics an area dominated by narrow interests (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Lebanon 2012). The militarization of many of the political parties during the years of conflict meant that they "lost their democratic representative authority, and a large gulf developed

between them and the public they purported to represent” (Krayem, 2007). This in turn has served to tighten the exclusive nature of elite-based and family oriented politics. Reform of the electoral system can hardly be achieved in a confessional state structure where political parties and politicians cling to authority and seek control over their particular sect, preventing any unified national voice from emerging. Women in the Lebanese parliament have been labelled the “women in black,” because many filled their positions by default after the death of a husband or brother who had formally held office (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Lebanon 2012). In 2009, Don Duncan of *Le Monde Diplomatique* reported that:

Women in Lebanon regularly come to power in mourning clothes, stepping into a seat vacated by an assassinated father or spouse. The newly elected MP Nayla Tueni, 26, is the daughter of Gibran Tueni, a former MP and editor of the daily *An-Nahar*, who was killed in 2005. Strida Geagea was thrust into politics when her husband, the Christian leader Samir Geagea, was imprisoned for 11 years during Syria’s occupation of Lebanon (2009).

Although this may often be the case, our interview with Vera Yammine of the Political Council of the Marada Movement yielded a different explanation. When asked how she became involved in her political party, Yammine answered: “I didn’t come into the party because my family was historically affiliated politically with it; in fact I joined because of my conviction in what the Marada represents. I found myself in the beliefs of Al Marada” (personal communication, 9 May 2012). Yammine did not elaborate further on the path to her political position, but she lamented that in Lebanon, “a woman is a voter but not voted for” and “her voice counts in the elections but her voice has no impact at the decision-making level”. She contended that although Lebanon’s patriarchal society indeed hinders women, there is an even greater obstacle: “the real problem is deeper and lies in the absence of the role of the state and thus any vision for development”.

Our interview with Rachel Moufarrej, the Head of the Lebanese Phalange Women’s Department, both converged with and departed from the response we received from Vera Yammine. Moufarrej said that, in her opinion, “it is not fair to say that the Lebanese political system itself stands in the way of women’s empowerment. The problem is that any coalition can block any draft law that it is not convinced about” (personal communication, May 6, 2012). She explains further that:

Most laws come from law projects that the Cabinet sends to Parliament. What makes the Lebanese system particular is that some law projects may be labelled urgent by the Cabinet to stress their importance for the parliament to conduct fast voting. If a law project is not labelled urgent it may, however, be postponed for eternity by the parliament. This makes reform difficult if it is not supported unanimously by the parliament before being taken up for discussion. The most important instances in the legislative process are actually the 17 different committees where all the law projects are discussed and either sent for voting in the parliament or postponed. That enables the committees to keep on postponing projects as long as all parties do not agree on the proposed law. Another important actor in the legislative process is the speaker of parliament,

Nabih Berri, who can choose whether or not he wants the parliament to convene for a vote. In the Lebanese context, having a law passed by the cabinet is in no way guarantee for getting it approved by the parliament. While the parliament is supposed to mirror the cabinet according to the law, this is not happening in reality.

In our survey of female political science students at LAU, we asked the students to state the obstacles preventing women from running for parliamentary elections in Lebanon. Students attributed it to the following factors: 30 percent cultural and religious obstacles, 25 percent political parties, 20 percent patriarchal society, and 10 percent absence of gender quota. Moreover, 7 out of the 20 students responded that the prevailing political culture in Lebanon is the main obstacle preventing women from winning parliamentary elections, whereas 4 respondents answered that it is due to the absence of a gender quota in Lebanon.

Sixteen students said that the implementation of a gender quota system is the best means of reversing the low percentage of women in parliament. 12 said that the minimum percentage of women needed in parliament to bring about political change is between 40 and 60 percent, whereas 6 respondents favored the 20-40 percent range. When this same sample was asked whether or not they think the current female parliamentarians were improving the status of women, 70 percent answered negatively. However, only a couple of these students were able to provide the names of all four women in parliament. In answering the question on whether or not these students would consider running in future parliamentary elections themselves, 8 said they would, 6 said they would not, and 6 said they were not sure. In another question, 15 interviewees answered that they believed women's increased political participation would translate into different political outcomes.

Raya Al Hassan, who sits on the advisory board of the Future Movement, posited that the lack of a quota system was not the only legislative barrier. In her opinion, "the problem is that every political project or proposal has become a hostage to the existing political system. Quota and other laws are being delayed because of the consociational system" (personal communication, May 14, 2012). When asked about what the election outcomes reflect about women's political participation, Al Hassan responded: "I have mixed feelings about this. The way I see it is that women are ambivalent in the sense that they can make a difference but they are not present. In a sense the women are to blame; they need to assume responsibility and stop making excuses. In other words responsibility is not a gender issue". Although she made sure to place the responsibility on both men and women, she did admit that "women in political life have it harder than men. It is a double challenge. First a woman has to prove herself as a woman and second as a newcomer. The hard thing is to make men regard you as an equal and to push them to take you seriously especially in parliament". She also added that "it is not the sectarian system alone but the ugliness of political life that is a very discouraging factor. It is very dirty and needs exceptional courage by a woman to be part of it. Moreover, after the war women have become more discouraged and wary about participating in politics".

The Third Periodic Report produced by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms

of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on Lebanon in 2006 noted the legislative difficulties of seeking policy reform. In its recommendations for reform on the matter of women's political participation, CEDAW advised that "the attempt to place all legislation in one basket may hinder the possibility of amending any at all, considering that, based upon the experience of previous attempts, certain laws arouse latent sectarian sensitivities within the Lebanese context that cannot be ignored" (CEDAW/C/LBN/3). This is to say that the lack of national unity has restricted the process of policy reform. Safiyya Saade (daughter of Antun Saadeh, the political thinker, philosopher, writer and politician who founded the Syrian Social Nationalist Party) maintained that personal status laws in Lebanon are among the factors contributing to the minimal representation of women in the political arena: "the constitutional council, created in the post-civil-war era as a government monitoring mechanism, is not allowed to infringe on religious affairs, so religious leaders basically have the power to tell the government to stay out of their affairs. I cannot, therefore, call myself a citizen unless I call myself a Christian or Muslim. There is no Lebanese citizen in the civic sense" (2011). Because of this, the state is unable to offer universal equity to women, as it is always trumped by the statutes set forth in all the various religious laws.

Despite the legislative processes that Rachel Moufarrej claimed restrain women's political participation, she did point out that the Lebanese Phalange party exerted considerable effort in pushing the issue forward on a party-basis. Some of the achievements that Moufarrej listed were the implementation of a 30 per cent gender quota "starting from the Political Bureau until the lowest levels;" the organization of lectures and awareness campaigns in more than 20 different regions across Lebanon; and cooperation with women's associations and NGOs and securing media assistance to advertise their programs and projects. Moufarrej then added, however, that "other than conferences, lectures, and protests nothing much has been achieved". She noted that "in a country like Lebanon where everything is managed by politicians, women's organizations have to work hand in hand with them in order to be able to achieve anything, since political parties are the ones that assign candidates for elections".

Mira Daher Violides, the Diplomat Chief of Protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants (MOFE), was critical of the limited role that women's organizations are able to play in terms of creating channels that facilitate greater numbers of female political candidates. She expressed the opinion that "the women's organizations are participating more at the social level; not much is done on the political level," adding that "of course the empowerment at the social level is very much needed and should lead to change in the long term" (Personal communication, May 14, 2012). Violides also voiced her view that "the main obstacle is the lack of political life and the lack of party politics. And since the state is completely absent, there are no policies being developed for men or women". She further added: "Here there are two issues. Discrimination in the practice of the law has become a habit in Lebanese politics. Moreover, social norms and practices are leading to an impasse as a result of which women are discouraged to participate in politics".

Socio-Cultural Explanations

Journalist Dahlia Mahdawi wrote that "women will only be able to play a greater part in the governance of Lebanon if the country's political system moved away from

the traditional status quo of a sectarian system towards a more secular meritocracy” (Common Ground New Service 16 June 2009). The Root Space conducted a 2009 survey of 50 Lebanese women over the age of 21. The majority of the respondents in the survey blamed Lebanon’s patriarchal society for the absence of women from political or parliamentary positions. Unlike the responses from our interviews, which blamed the political and state system in Lebanon as the greatest obstacle and saw Lebanon’s traditional values and patriarchal society as more fluid and subject to change and progress, the survey respondents were quick to point the finger at social values and norms. Some of the norms listed were perceptions that men “have more control and are more trusted than women,” that “women are thought to be incompetent and are looked at as weaker,” that women “are generally responsible for house care and educating children” and that the media only serves to perpetuate these pervasive stereotypes (Saadeh & Obeid, 2009).

The Root Space conducted parallel interviews with women in politics to gauge their takes on the major obstacles preventing women from acquiring political positions. Unlike the women interviewed in the course of our research, the opinions of these women focused on socio-cultural constraints. Ex-parliamentarian Solange Gemayal posited that “having a few number of women in parliament is related to the social issues rather than the political issues because Lebanon went through a lot during the past 50 years, which didn’t encourage women to enter politics” (Saadeh & Obeid, 2009). MP Gilberte Zouein similarly explained that “men are dominant in our society and until today nobody accepts the idea of having a woman in politics despite her success in the social and economical fields” (Saadeh & Obeid, 2009). As Raya Al Hassan said: “women have other responsibilities like family and children, making it harder for them to balance between political and family responsibilities. Having said all this, this doesn’t justify that women should be ambivalent. We have a role to play for our country and for our children”. In Vera Yammine’s opinion, there are many factors which prevent women from running for political offices. These include societal and cultural values, and religious mores which view the role of women primarily in the management of family affairs.

Conclusion

Contrary to what many believe, the main obstacle to women’s political participation may not be the patriarchal or family-based culture itself, but rather the political culture, the state structure, and the sectarian divides inherent in it. For this reason, our recommendations do not focus on changing the state, but working within the system by focusing on what the parties themselves can do. Nevertheless, we found a good summarizing point in the words of Vera Yammine: “The path to change will not come from a man or a woman individually: the primary responsibility falls on civil society and the dynamics of political life that would provide security to all citizens, men or women” (personal communication, May 9, 2012).

The government should support and facilitate the work of civil society groups and the media to initiate public education campaigns that would promote the social acceptance of women’s involvement in politics and civil society. Since most of the interviewees cited the lack of national unity as a main obstacle, the focus should be on the implementation of gender quotas within the parties themselves as a starting point.

Parties should eliminate the special committees for women to reduce the segregation of men and women in politics. Political parties should implement gender quotas within the student and youth sectors to ensure that gender equality starts at the base levels and that women are trained for leadership positions early on.

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