

Women in Power and Decision making Positions:

Conditions and Restraints

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Women today are considered to be outside the political and administrative power structures and their participation in the decision-making process is non-existent. As far as their participation in the political life is concerned they are still on the margins. The existence of patriarchal society in Lebanon as well as the absence of governmental policies and procedures that aim at helping women and enhancing their political participation has made it very difficult for women to be accepted as leaders and to be granted votes in elections (UNIFEM, 2002).

This above quote is taken from a report that was prepared to assess the progress made regarding the status of Lebanese women both on the social and governmental levels in light of the Beijing Platform for Action – the name given to the provisions of the Fourth Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The above quote describes the slow progress achieved by Lebanese women in view of the ambitious goal that requires that the proportion of women occupying administrative or political positions in Lebanon should reach 30 percent of the total by the year 2005!

Whenever there is talk addressing the political participation of women, a question is often asked: Why are Lebanese women lagging behind in accessing decision-making positions despite the fact that they have made important achievements at the level of education, employment, and social engagement?

According to statistics issued in 2007 by the Central Administration for Statistics the illiteracy rate

among females over ten years of age has decreased from about 60 percent in 1970 to about 12 percent. In addition, the net enrollment rate of girls has increased in primary education where it is now equal to that of boys – around 93 percent. In some specializations, the proportion of female enrollment and graduation at the tertiary level exceeded that of males. Moreover, the proportion of female dropouts at all levels has decreased and it is sometimes lower than that of their male counterparts.

The female labor force surpassed the 20 percent mark for all age groups. The figures are double when considering women in the 25-29 age bracket (42.6 percent). Women constitute the majority of employees in the fields of education, health, media, and the arts. Indicators show that the situation of women in our society is improving and Lebanese women fare much better than women in neighboring countries. But the fact remains that the increased participation of women in the labor force did not bring about any real change with regards to decision-making positions in the administrative

field nor did it lead to an increase in the proportion of women in leadership positions in politics when compared to the same neighboring countries. One does not need more than a preliminary observation to find the answer to the above-mentioned paradox. Education is no magic formula that enables one to take the lead. Also a person's profession, irrespective of how important it is, does not confer on her or him leadership qualifications. In addition, the mechanisms for access to power in our society do not require an advanced educational degree nor do they require ample experience in certain professions or occupations. An advanced degree and professional experience only count when two qualified candidates are competing for the same position under the strict rules and mechanisms that govern the selection of political leaders.

But what are these rules and mechanisms?

The mechanisms that govern access to positions of power or decision-making positions, especially political ones, in Lebanon, are still restricted to the rules of sectarian quotas. These rules make one's religious sect, family, and region (i.e. affiliation by birth) factors that govern one's access to positions of power. Some of these rules are openly stated; the high-ranking positions in the country, namely the office of the President, the Prime Minister, Speaker of the Parliament, the army commander, etc. are reserved for members of specific religious groups (e.g. the President is Maronite, the Prime Minister is Sunni, etc.).

This confessional quota system is based primarily on the "fair" distribution of governmental seats among the eighteen officially recognized religious sects in the country. Other "natural" (as opposed to societal) factors/affiliations also taken into consideration are related to place of birth, family, region, etc. The selection of a person in a position of authority is thus the result of the balance between all of these factors and reflects the weight of each one of them within the whole.

This means that a person, male or female, who announces his/her candidacy to one of the positions of power or decision-making positions is actually

declaring his/her allegiance to the sect, family, village, town, or neighborhood he/she was born into. This also means that the person appointed to one of the leading governmental positions is chosen not because of his/her educational or professional efficiency but primarily because of his/her sectarian and other related types of affiliations.

Moreover, in Lebanon, like any country that is governed by a patriarchal system, belonging to a particular sect or to a particular family is inherited through the male line of kinship (bloodline). This inheritance is given to the person, man or woman, through his/her paternal lineage only and is preserved along the male lineage. By contrast, a women's lineage or affiliation changes through marriage, as does her sectarian, regional, and familial affiliation (except in the case of endogamous marriages). Therefore, the appointment of males in decision-making positions in governmental institutions or in parliamentary or municipal electoral lists or even in parties and trade unions at times, has clear benefits for all actors, whether political authorities, decision-makers, or recipients and beneficiaries, i.e. citizens under this system. By contrast to the appointment of men in administrative decision-making positions, or to inviting them to participate in the electoral lists, women are official representatives of neither the sectarian communities and families nor the geographical areas.

Families who have no male heirs are the exception to this generalization. In such cases, a woman (i.e. the widow or daughter or etc.) may run for a parliamentary position or for a position in the local municipality, in order to preserve the "right" of the male heir to run for a parliamentary seat when he (i.e. her young son or brother etc.) is eligible to do so when he comes of age.

The Lebanese State in its capacity as the overall representative of the Lebanese society and whose function comprises the fostering of interests of all groups indiscriminately is bound by the same sectarian restrictions. This for example is evident in the make up of the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) and the nomination

and appointment of its members. The NCLW is the highest national women's official body in the country. It was established in 1996 in compliance with the global resolution put forth during the Beijing World Conference on Women that called upon all governments to establish a national body to ensure woman's advancement in each of the participating countries. Law No. 720/98 that decrees for its establishment stipulates that the NCLW should consist of members known for their "active and effective participation in women's issues and affairs" as well as of female deputies and ministers. The latter can serve as ex-officio members throughout the period that they are in office. This commission has an advisory role that it renders to the government and to all official administrations and public institutions dealing with matters related to women's affairs. These tasks include expressing opinions and remarks as well as proposing comprehensive plans to the government in order to achieve the goals for which it was created.

The NCLW consists of an elite group of Lebanese women who are prominent in various professional fields and a few activists from civil society. Their appointment was less related to their interest in women's political and partisan rights, and more to the fact that they represent the sects and families that they were born into, or the sects and families that they are affiliated to by marriage. This is the case despite the fact that the law that decreed the establishment of the NCLW stated explicitly that appointed women should be known for their activism /work on women's issues. The majority of members are newcomers who have recently adopted the cause of women.

Justifications for the appointment of these women follow the same logic applied when appointing men. It is assumed that because they are women (biologically or by nature), they are prone to embracing women's issues and fighting for their rights the same way that men defend and uphold the interests of their sects because of their natural affiliation to those sects.

The Lebanese women's movement was not called upon to participate in the NCLW nor was its

work an inspiration to the commission when implementing its agenda. It is important to note here that given that the members serve for a term, every time the appointed members of the commission start familiarizing themselves with women's concerns and start working on some aspects of "women's cause", their term comes to an end. It should be noted here that women in the women's movement have not struggled, neither individually nor collectively, to become members of the NCLW. In our opinion, they should have because they are entitled to it. The formation of the NCLW is basically the fruit of their struggle over the years, if not its inevitable result.

Examining the status of female leadership represented by the NCLW clearly reveals the limitations inhibiting the access of women to decision-making positions, namely sectarianism and family and regional interests. This sectarianism is guilty of sabotaging the state's role of representing actively the interests of social groups. The sectarian system does not only exclude women from leadership positions, but also continues to undermine the role of a leading women's body (i.e. NCLW) that was created as a result of different factors: the struggle of the women's movement in our country, and the Lebanese state's responsiveness to the international will.

Women who are members of non-governmental organization (NGOs) and women associations are divided on matters related to positions of power and decision-making positions. Some concentrate on propaganda and media, demanding the participation of women in positions of power and decision-making during events of political, administrative, syndicate, and municipal appointments and nominations. These are often armed with international conventions that the Lebanese state is signatory to through the United Nations agencies. They suggest the quota system as a framework for this participation. For instance, the Lebanese Women's Council, on every electoral event or ministerial or administrative appointment, relentlessly calls for giving women their share in nominations and appointments. Other women groups, and in order to achieve the same goal, focus

on working with women at the grassroots level all over the country. They do so within the available frameworks, in order to mobilize women and motivate them to participate in the political process both as voters and candidates during the election season and in broader political life.

In my opinion, the Lebanese women's movement should not be satisfied with small gains when lobbying for women to reach positions of power and decision-making positions. Nor should Lebanese women be content when a few women, even if qualified, are appointed once in a while in administrative positions or scattered on electoral lists based on some distribution of spoils. Anyway, these cases remain scarce. Indeed, there are instances when some of these elected or appointed women were actually opposed to women's rights in Lebanon. The best example is when, in 1998, female deputies in parliament opposed the women's movement demand for an optional "civil personal status laws" (known as president Hrawi's civil law) to replace the existing sectarian laws on marriage.

This latter model of female representation will always be ineffective given that it is based on religious sectarianism and is governed by the traditional patriarchal structures that marginalize and exclude women. The situation will not change as long as women in positions of power do not challenge these structures.

There are two approaches to the question of women reaching positions of power and decision-making positions. The first approach is current and is based on the gains that women acquired since the beginning of their movement, namely the recognition of the specificity of their issues. Since the decision to create the NCLW is part of this recognition, the Commission is the ideal platform to bring forth the concept of women's political and public leadership and to promote non-discrimination against women.

Since one of the slogans of the women's movement is "reaching decision-making positions", the struggle of women activists in the women's movement to hold the majority of positions

within the NCLW is vital to activate the leadership role that it was deprived of due to the sectarian considerations that governed its formation. This majority within NCLW is one of the most important ways to reach decision-making positions. We must not forget that the Commission has a consultative role with decision-makers in so far as policies and strategies related to the Lebanese women are concerned. If this authority is properly activated, women will de facto be in a decision-making position. It is a position where women can prove, through actual practice, their competence not only in taking up women-related decisions but in leading the society in other areas as well.

We note, in this context, that Wafaa Al-Dikah Hamzeh, one of the first two Lebanese female ministers ever to be part of Cabinet in 2004, was a founding member of the NCLW. She witnessed its first three mandates and was for three terms a member of its executive bureau (Minister Hamzeh said, in several newspaper interviews, right after her appointment, that her membership in the Commission was one of the reasons for her appointment as Minister.) Thus, choosing a minister from this women's body reflects the importance of its leading position for the women's movement and Lebanese women in general. It also serves as a factor conducive to the conceptualization of the NCLW as a stepping stone to other leading posts, the parliament being one of those. In my opinion, the NCLW is a body that came about due to local and international circumstances but serves presently as the ultimate testing ground for Lebanese women to prove their competence in leadership.

The second approach is strategic for it calls for incorporating the women's cause in all issues related to it in societal frameworks that promote social change i.e. women non-governmental organizations and its allies working under the Human Rights umbrella in civil society. This approach sees in the arrival of women to positions of power and decision-making an aspect of a much broader struggle to promote justice between people in general and men and women in particular. The second approach also aims to promote "looking at the world through the eyes of women" (as the

Beijing slogan calls for). It tries to bridge the gap between understanding reality as formulated by males historically according to their interests, and reality as experienced by women from their own stances and outlooks.

This approach further aspires to shift the prevalent standpoint vis-a-vis decision-making positions from an exclusive perspective to an inclusive one where the interests of women as well as the interests of all social groups, irrespective of age, gender, or creed are included in the development process of our society.

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