

Brigitte Kheir Keirouz, Environmentalist and Feminist

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“The only common ground uniting all Lebanese people, regardless of their confessional membership or political ideology, is the environment. It is the very basis of our lives, yet not enough is being done to protect and preserve it.” So asserts Brigitte Kheir Keirouz, a young environmental activist who now serves as the Lebanese National Coordinator for LIFE (Local Initiative Facility for Urban Environment), a project of the United Nations Development Program. Keirouz, a dynamic young woman who hails from the north of Lebanon, holds two degrees from the American University of Beirut (a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics and a Masters in Public Health). She worked for Save the Children during the war years and has always been concerned about public and environmental health conditions in Lebanon.

In her current professional capacity, Keirouz is trying to mobilize action and legislation to halt the general degradation of the Lebanese environment in the post-war period. “Our behavior towards the environment shows a complete lack of foresight!”, Keirouz exclaims. “The negligence and indifference towards nature is so pronounced. People do not seem to realize — or to care — that the costs of degrading the environment year after year are so much more expensive than projects to remedy and halt the damage. For example, instead of spending a little bit more money on creating environmentally sound quarries in remote, treeless areas of the country, such as the eastern mountain sides, companies are cutting down trees and removing valuable top soil in the Metn and Kesirwan to mine gravel for buildings and road construction. This is a criminal action! But who is trying to stop it?” Keirouz specifically condemned the destruction of the Nahr Ibrahim area, where important historical ruins are located, and quarrying near prehistoric caves in Antelias. “People are quarrying there simply because it is cheaper and more convenient for them; their only interest is to make money fast without any thought of the future repercussions.”

Another environmental disaster that concerns Keirouz is the destruction of Lebanon’s sea front. “Lebanon’s beaches are one of the country’s biggest tourist attractions, but unfortunately, 20,000 industrial plants dump wastes on the beaches each year. Not only our sea water, but also our ground water, surface waters and soils have become very polluted. Take the example of the environmental atrocities in Burj Hammoud [a suburb

northeast of downtown Beirut], where various kinds of dangerous toxic wastes were dumped during the war. Every ton of solid waste produced in Beirut ends up in the sea, so the water is extremely polluted now.”

Keirouz has some advice and suggestions for halting, or at least limiting, Lebanon’s rampant environmental destruction. First, she recommends that the Government adopt the “PPP” policy, *i.e.*, “Polluter Pays Principle”, which stipulates that taxes must be imposed on industrial polluters equal in monetary amount to the cost of treating their wastes, thus forcing them to adopt environmentally safe practices. For instance, in Chekkah (a heavy industry site located midway between Jbeil and Tripoli), the Government should impose taxes on factories which are greater than the costs of air filters and scrubbers for smokestacks. Another way to reduce harm to the environment would be to enforce Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for every reconstruction project undertaken in Lebanon. Keirouz cited the example of the proposed Inter-Arab highway, which will link Beirut to Damascus. “How environmentally friendly is this project? So many new buildings, including large hotels, will be built along the highway. Will these hotels have adequate septic tanks?”

Keirouz feels that legislation is key in fighting environmental devastation. She suggests that the Lebanese Parliament enact new laws requiring that trees be planted around every new construction site and that water treatment facilities be installed in every municipality in Lebanon. Most importantly, however, Keirouz stresses that municipal elections be held soon to replenish and reinforce local government throughout Lebanon. Since no municipal elections have been held in the country since the 1960s, municipal governments are under-staffed and ineffectual. Free and independent elections at the municipal level would guarantee the installment of a new generation of local officials, who, it is hoped, will be environmentally aware and concerned enough to take action to halt the wholesale destruction of one of Lebanon’s greatest resources: its natural beauty.

Keirouz suggests that women may be able to play a key role at this level. Noting that women were strong, brave and persevering during the long, tiring years of Lebanon’s civil war, Keirouz feels that women are less interested in ideological differences and political maneuvers than men are, and that this makes them more capable of focusing fully on accomplishing the task at hand. “During the war, Lebanese women proved that they were strong. They had to assume so many responsibilities, in and

outside of their homes. They were forced to become stronger, and as a result, they are now ready and willing to engage in political action. Also, women were able to deal with all of the disasters of the war. No matter how bleak the situation became, they never gave up hope.”

Although Keirouz is pleased to see women in Lebanon’s Parliament, she notes that their arrival to positions of power resulted from inheriting their seats from male relatives. “But, at least they are there; it is a start!” What Keirouz would like to see, however, is more women serving as ministers in the Lebanese Government. “It is about time we had a woman minister! Why not? Women are as capable as men, and perhaps more persevering; they have real commitment and passion

about their work.” Keirouz’s overall assessment of women in post-war Lebanon is that they have “definitely progressed” and proved themselves capable in the private and public spheres.

Keirouz relates that her own greatest satisfaction and reward is knowing that, through her work, she is playing a part in preserving the common good of the whole world and ensuring a safer future for tomorrow’s children. “It is a good feeling to know that you are pursuing a higher goal, and knowing that what you are ultimately working for is the preservation of Mother Earth.” If more energetic, hard-working and conscientious young women like Brigitte Kheir Keirouz enter the field of public service and environmental protection, Lebanon’s future can only be brighter.



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