

Special Features

LINDA MATAR:

PRESIDENT OF THE LEAGUE OF LEBANESE WOMAN'S RIGHTS

By Ghena Ismail

Without any significant political, social or financial background, just a strong will and firm belief in her right and the right of other women to an active, dignified life, Linda Matar made her way to the Presidency of the League of Lebanese Woman's Rights in 1978 and the leadership of the Lebanese Women's Council in 1996. This was no small achievement for a woman who had to leave school and take evening classes at the age of twelve in order to help her parents financially. Although her formal education stopped after she received her baccalaureate degree, Matar asserts that her learning never ceased, since life itself was her real school. Ever since she was a young girl, Matar found herself confronting two big questions: 'Where is justice?' and 'Why is there discrimination between men and women?' These questions disturbed her, because they remained unanswered for quite a long time.

Married at the age of 17, Linda Matar's struggles in life continued. Her entry into the social domain began in the 1950s. She recalls that once during the parliamentary elections, she was standing on her balcony and saw a man in an epileptic state being taken in to cast his vote. She found it very ironic that an epileptic man's vote was accepted, but a woman's vote was not. After a while, when women's movements became active, two ladies from a woman's organization knocked on her door. She greeted them and took them around to meet the people in her neighborhood. Eventually, she founded a branch of this organization in her area. She started as an ordinary member in The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights, later becoming Secretary General, and finally, President. It is worth mentioning that The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights is one of the very few Lebanese women's organizations that address political issues directly.

In 1996, soon after being elected President of the Lebanese Women's Council, The League of Lebanese Woman's Rights asked Linda Matar to nominate herself for the Lebanese Parliamentary elections. At first she refused, since candidates were required to contribute 10 million Lebanese pounds (more than six thousand U.S. dollars), which neither the Union nor Linda Matar could afford. Eventually, however, she decided to nominate herself. "Women cannot keep asking for their political rights while refusing to take part in the political system, regardless of how they may view it." As soon as she announced that she wanted to nominate herself, the funding was secured.

Part of it was contributed in the name of the late Surayya Adra, the founder of the League of Lebanese Woman's Rights, who had asked her husband before she died to contribute whenever he could to women's issues. The rest of the funding was secured by other friends of the League. The considerable support Linda Matar received convinced her, and probably convinced other women as well, that it is not necessary for a woman to have a weighty social or political background to gain the public's trust. People's belief in a woman can arise from her own fighting spirit. Many people voted for Linda Matar without even knowing her. Of course, all women in the League of the Lebanese Woman's Rights registered in Beirut voted for Linda Matar, but not all of the women in the other committees supported her candidacy. According to Linda Matar, the reason why women in other committees did not vote for her is that not every committee believes in the necessity of women's participation in the political process. Many believe that a woman's responsibilities towards her family and children outweigh any other activities.

Obviously, women are incapable of unifying their various and often conflicting demands, which makes a woman's mission harder in the parliament, since there is no agreement on what she is expected to achieve. Linda Matar believes that the war has shaped the current realities. "War contributed to dividing people in general, and consequently, women. Today, every woman is subservient to her confessional sect. However, the Lebanese Women's Council remained united and was not divided as some people wanted it to be during the war. This is due to the efforts of Ms. Emily Fares Ibrahim, who was the head of the Council during the war. Despite all the threats and pressures she received to divide the union into two parts, one in the West of Beirut, and another in the East, Ms. Ibrahim strongly affirmed that she would rather halt the activity of the Council than divide it." So, differences among women do exist, especially concerning the Personal Status Code. However, Linda Matar asserts that even if a woman's sectarian membership prevents her from openly protesting a particular law, it does not necessarily mean that she will not support a legislative change, once it does occur.

Linda Matar's national scheme triggered so much debate since many people believed it did not focus specifically on women's rights. Among the twelve goals of her campaign platform, only one called for improving women's status. However, Linda Matar, who cannot perceive the woman outside the framework of her society, asserts that if a woman succeeds in becoming a

Member in the Parliament she should not focus her attention exclusively on women's rights. Whatever affects the country inevitably affects women, too. She also notes that if one carefully reads her campaign platform, one will notice that women's issues are implicit in every article. "I called for Lebanon's independence and unity in the first article. I also called for the release of the hostages and a just solution for the families of the kidnapped. No one is expecting the 18,000 hostages still missing to return, of course. However, problems related to their absence need to be resolved. The government should issue a law that pronounces these hostages dead. Otherwise, the social and economic status of many women and children will remain undefined. In Islam, although a woman is automatically considered divorced after the absence of her husband for more than five years, she does not inherit anything if her husband is not officially declared deceased." By tackling the issue of the disappeared, Linda Matar is trying to find a fair and humane solution for thousands of Lebanese women and their families. Her platform also emphasized the importance of good working conditions and a decent wage for all employees, which obviously includes women. Additionally, she stressed the right of every citizen to attend school and college, and noted the importance of respecting the rights of all teachers. "The woman is more involved than the man in this domain, since seventy-five percent of all teachers are women," Matar points out. She also stressed the necessity of providing every citizen with proper health services, shelter, and a healthy environment. Due to a lack of affordable housing, many young people are either unable to get married or are left with no choice but living with the husbands' families. She called for the elimination of discrimination among all citizens. "I believe that many men and women suffer injustices due to class differences." She also called for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in her campaign platform. "By carefully reading my platform, one will notice that women's issues are implicated in all of the issues presented. However, as a person who has spent most of her life engaged in social and political struggles, I cannot place any goal before that of a free and independent Lebanon."

Making women's issues a priority in one's election platform does not necessarily mean that these issues are more important than liberating Lebanon. Rather, it means that as an activist in the women's domain, this may be an area in which Linda Matar could perform best and thus benefit people the most. However, Linda Matar explains that the basic demand of the women's movement in Lebanon is eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and adding new laws to protect and advance women, which she has included in her national scheme. Linda Matar believes in giving women's issues special emphasis only when one is preparing for an exclusively women's event, such as the Beijing Conference. The specialization to which people refer is made once one is elected to the parliament through the formation of different committees."

Linda Matar is now planning to demand the formation of a parliamentary women's committee that will be partially represented by women from the non-governmental sphere. However, she stresses that being a member in a certain parliamentary committee does not obviate an MP's responsibility towards other issues. Undoubtedly, Linda Matar believes that a member is likely to represent the perspective from which he or she came, and to emphasize the demands of this particular group of people. However, this emphasis does not exempt Parliamentary members from addressing issues related to the country's welfare in general.

Although Linda Matar did not succeed in winning a seat in the Parliament, she did win the support of many people. She received 7,500 votes, when it was not expected for her to win more than 1,500 to 2,000 votes! This proved that a woman can make it on her own, without having a political family heritage. "Even if I do not nominate myself for the coming elections, I consider that, through my participation in the 1996 elections, I have opened the door for other qualified women to nominate themselves." As for Linda Matar's evaluation of the 1996 elections, she believes there should be one electoral district, or electoral areas represented proportionally, *i.e.*, a given number of people should vote for a certain number of candidates. "It is unfair that one candidate needs 120,000 votes to win, while another requires only 10,000 votes to be elected to Parliament. Until we change this, we cannot claim that we have truly democratic elections in Lebanon." Moreover, Linda Matar wishes that non-sectarian elections be conducted without any pre-determined quotas of candidates or seats based on the proportionality of Lebanon's different sects. Although she acknowledges that the Lebanese people are not ready to participate in non-sectarian elections right now she strongly believes that if we work from now on to change the public's mentality, there will be a greater possibility for conducting democratic elections in the future. According to Linda Matar, quotas are not the ideal solution, not only with respect to the sectarian problem, but also with respect to woman's issues.

"A quota system guided by certain rules may be a good idea. Women should be nominated by the sectors they represent. For instance, the Lebanese Women's Council should elect a number of women in the Council, the Lawyer's Syndicate should elect a number of women as well, and the same applies for every other union. Such a procedure minimizes the likelihood of forgery and political favoritism."

If Linda Matar nominated herself again in the future, she would definitely start preparing earlier. However, as for her national agenda, she would not change anything, since she considers it integrative. To those who thought that she neglected women's issues, she says that she did not. "Women's issues are an inseparable part of my work. "Through my long experience, I have learned that women's issues cannot be separated from social and national issues."