

A Noticeable Rise of Women to the Scene

Fall 1992 witnessed a great deal of activities and developments with respect to women in Lebanon and some other Arab countries.

The first event was the Conference on Arab Women and Creativity which was attended by a number of Arab women and men, and which ended with a call for more seminars and encounters promoting women's creativity production in the Arab world. The second event was the Conference on women and the Environment sponsored by the Institute for women's Studies, the Frederich-Ebert Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The Institute is planning another Conference on Arab Women and the Environment which will include participants from Arab countries as well.

Post-war Lebanese politics is experiencing a significant participation by women. Furthermore, in the Arab world, Kuwaiti women demonstrated against their continued exclusion from politics, notably elections and voting rights.

The General trend seems a rush of activities for the empowerment of Arab women in the various sectors of society. The situation is slowly shifting from arguments of hidden potentials and lack of opportunity to actual achievements and abilities of women. Meanwhile, politics, in the world and in the Middle East in particular, remains largely masculine and patriarchal. . . . Does that mean these women will have to think like a man, work like a dog and act like a lady? Hence, the struggle is still within the scope of traditional role definitions, social divisions of labor, and patriarchal influence.

Noticeably, the general trend in the social debates and socio-political circles reflects a concern about women being given traditional feminine roles in politics thus reinforcing traditional-

role definitions. Women are concerned that they are not transferred from domestic duties in the private world to domestic duties in the public world. As one scholar said, "we do not want to be moved from cleaning in the house into Ministries where we would be expected to clean the streets, because it is within the scope of our traditional role", i.e. domesticating women's involvement in politics. "Women must participate and be allowed to participate in political life at all its levels."

Therefore, the critical test lies in the hands of the women who are coming to power. It is up to them to defend women's rights by projecting an objective approach and avoid falling into criticism of discrimination themselves. The fact remains that in traditional societies like the Middle East, the Women's Movement is perceived as being sexually biased for women's rights rather than nationalistic, and therefore rated as secondary in priority vis-a-vis the other problems, such as economic crises, geo-political organization of the region, the Israeli-Arab conflict, displaced populations, equality on all its levels, etc. Hence, critical post-war issues tend to take priority over women's suffrage.

Why this inferiority status and esteem in the perception and the self-perception of women in politics? Why is politics, a sector only recently witnessing women's participation, so discriminating? Is it because of the history of patriarchy in politics? Is it lack of women's experience in politics? Or is it that the Women Movement's activities have not been aggressive enough and has so far performed social work more than lobbyism and activism?

This is NOT to discredit or to put down the achievements of the Women's Movement and women's philanthropic, educational and social work associations in Lebanon. One

cannot deny that they dealt well and effectively with many issues to increase women's participation in education, work, trade, and even politics, although shily. However, in a patriarchal society like this, women-related issues are labeled with the very discrimination they so strongly fight. Hence, the Movement is always hindered with semantic arguments about traditional role definitions and the patriarchal system. Yet the women of the region have been progressing and developing along various channels, consequently, producing the very women who are entering parliament and the government today. We note that, historically, women have had a major and mainly informal influence and participation in politics by virtue of the men they supported, whereas, official and formal accession to political power and authority is based on election by pedigree or proxy for a male relative.

Lebanon is for the first time witnessing an official rise of women to the scene. These women will become pioneers for their sisters in the future. It is not how feminist they are that counts at this point but to what extent they can demonstrate women's abilities and potentials to be in effective leadership positions. If, unfortunately, feminism has a negative connotation and works against women in politics in the region, it is the achievements of our new women-politicians that will stand out as proof. The women entering the rings have the golden opportunity to make a difference for the women of their country. The absence of women from parliament and cabinet was an obvious imbalance and therefore, their presence is the first step toward establishing some kind of balance between the men and the women in society, legislation and politics •

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