

# Women in Politics

## by Rose Ghurayyib

In a Gallup poll organized in 1975, in the United States of America, 73 percent of the respondents said they were ready to vote for a woman candidate for the presidency. In another poll arranged by the same group, 70 percent preferred to see a larger number of women in government positions because "experience has shown that they are more patient than men, more versed in economy and less corruptible."<sup>(1)</sup>

Since 1975, women, almost everywhere, have made noticeable steps in the political fields. Already in 1975, they obtained their political rights not only in developed countries but in most of the African and Asian countries.

Political rights however, did not mean that they were prepared to hold leading political offices. In a few countries, their accession was slow but sure. In other countries, it was sudden yet with doubtful results, while in other countries development was still nil.

### WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

In this category, we may mention, first, Indira Ghandi, who received from her father, Nehru, an adequate training qualifying her for the difficult task of Prime Minister. She handled the post successfully from 1968 to 1984, the year of her assassination. Indira is considered to be the most formidable Prime Minister India has ever had.

Second, Margaret Thatcher, who for several years was the leader of the Conservative party in England and then rose to the position of Prime Minister. For eleven years she proved a remarkable ability to deal with the

political and economic problems. Two years after her resignation in 1990, another strong-minded leader, Betty Boothroyd, was elected as the first female speaker of the House of Commons in seven hundred years.

Less known among female political leaders of Europe today is the Portuguese Maria de Lourdes Pentasilgo, who equipped with several degrees, served as: Researcher in the National Nuclear Energy Commission; State Secretary for Social Security and as Minister of Social Affairs. In 1979, she became the first woman Prime Minister in Portugal and is currently a Special Advisor to the President of the Republic.

In Norway, where women enjoy equal rights since 1978, 25.8 percent of Parliament and four out of seventeen ministers are women. Furthermore, 23 percent of the municipal Council were women in 1980<sup>(2)</sup>. In 1981, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland became the first Prime Minister of Norway.

In France, women's suffrage was proclaimed in 1945, and equal rights in 1958. The Women's Liberation Movement was founded in 1970, ten years after the Movement emerged in the United States of America. Political differences split the movement into Radicals and Socialists. Opposed by reactionary tendencies like the Psych and Po (Psychoanalysis and Politics), it enjoyed the support of militant feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and her followers. In spite of material difficulties, the Movement had a strong impact on French society. The sustained efforts of its members succeeded in increasing the number of women in responsible government positions. Hence, it culminated in the appointment of Edith Cresson by Mitterand as the first Prime Minister of

the France in 1992.

In the United States of America the Equal Rights Amendment was promulgated in 1923 followed, in 1972, by the "Prohibition of All Forms of discrimination" in hiring, in educational programs and activities at schools and colleges which receive federal fundings. In government, women hold 4 percent of all elected posts, and form 2 percent of senators, 5 percent of members of Congress, 3 lieutenant governors and 3 cabinet members. Women's association complain of sex discrimination in jobs and salaries, hence attributing it to misapplication of the Equal Rights Amendment. Feminism in the States has to deal with problems related to racial discrimination and controversial ideologies. Nevertheless, the Movement there, which has been in full swing since the early sixties, is the most active and most influential nationally and internationally. Compared to similar movements in other parts of the world, it has the larger output of women's studies, women's publications and women's international networks of information and publicity.

In the new Democracies of Eastern Europe, four extraordinary women seized the opportunity offered them to occupy top government posts. In Estonia, Maju Lauristin, a champion of environmental issues, holds, since 1987, the position of Prime Minister and is one of the founders of the rebellious Popular Front of Estonia. Kazimiera Prunskiene of Lithuania, an expert economist and assistant of Gorbachev, is Prime Minister since 1988 and helped found the Independence Movement in the country.

Sabine Bergman Pohl, a practiced physician from East Germany was elected speaker of the House and then Minister without a portfolio in the

United Bundestag.

In Poland, a freelance writer, Malgorzana Niezabitowska became the spokeswoman of the Polish government.<sup>(3)</sup>

Most of these women are novices in political affairs and they intend to persist as activists and party leaders. Furthermore, they have insured themselves a membership in Parliament in case of quitting their executive posts.

## WOMEN IN THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES<sup>(4)</sup>

We notice that women who ascended to leadership and government positions in countries of the third world owe more to male dynasties than to militant feminism. Such is the case of Chamorro of Nicaragua, who rose to the position of President of the Republic after the assassination of her husband in 1978. The same applies to the promotion of Aquino to the presidency of the Philippines in 1986 after her husband fell victim of the Marcos' regime. In spite of her good intentions, Corazon Aquino was not qualified for the task entrusted to her. As to Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, she succeeded as an avenger of her father who was executed in 1979 by Zia-ul-Hakk and as a restorer of democracy in her country. She, however, discredited herself by resorting to feudal politics during the short period in office.

Similar family politics brought two women to Parliament in another Third World country, namely Lebanon. Thus, the first Woman Deputy, Myrna Bustani, was appointed successor of her father, Emile bustani who died in a plane crash in 1956. The second Deputy is Nayla Mouawad, wife of the President-elect, Rene Mouawad, (assassinated in 1990)

The policy of political succession by pedigree is inherited from the period when rulers were heads of extended tribes or powerful feudal families, who

could legate authority to wives and daughters in the absence or minority of male heirs.

This policy proved insufficient, except in the case of Indira Ghandi who was adequately prepared for her lifelong career by her father. On the other hand, Aquino's weak administration in the Philippines taught most Filipinos, if not all of them, to refute a candidacy based on family right or hereditary succession. Publicity posters carrying the slogan: "No to political dynasty" were used by partisans of Miriam Defensor Santiago, a candidate for the presidential elections (May 25, 1992) who, unlike her rival Ramos, son of Aquino, won her popularity by merit. Highly educated, holder of two law degrees from the University of Michigan, she is a strong disciplinarian who firmly attacks corruption and, therefore, has a 50 percent chance of success.<sup>(5)</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

"Women around the world are sharing the lessons of social change in the faith that knowledge is power after all."<sup>(6)</sup> Stereotypes are among the first obstacles in women's struggle for change. At the risk of remaining single, they are engaged in the search for higher education and higher positions in social and political fields, instead of the traditional search for a husband.

In the Arab world, the recent wave of fundamentalism impeded in many ways the spreading women's movement. In their struggle to achieve equality with men in the fields of education, work and personal status laws, women seem to forget the importance of equal participation in politics, particularly in leadership positions which hold the key to radical and immediate change. Studies about the role of Arab women in the politics of their countries are few <sup>(7)</sup>. Two topics of permanent interest to those who deal with women's problems are: Women's education and women's

work. Meanwhile two other important topics receive less attention: First, the study of women's personal status laws, which thru the growing influence of fundamentalists, has recently reached a standstill. The second issue is women's political rights and the efforts spent for the purpose of integrating them into the politics of their countries. These topics attract few authors and researchers not only in the Arab world but also in developed countries where the number of women occupying leading political roles remains low.

A recent study about the participation of Lebanese women in politics during the war shows that they did not make real efforts to organize themselves into electoral groups preparing them to assume leading political roles. In political parties, women prefer to act as followers to men. Their presence in syndicates is scarcely noticeable because of their small number and their self-effacement.<sup>(8)</sup> To promote women's interest and participation in politics, the following steps are recommended:

1. Increasing women's enrollment in parties and syndicates, where they may act as activists and inspirers of change instead of mere followers.
2. Feminists organizations may cooperate and organize into electoral groups, working together for the promotion of qualified women candidates.
3. As electoral bodies, women should stand against the traditional policy which allows succession by pedigree. This tradition practiced on a larger scale in Arab countries under the name of feudal privilege, tends to allow unqualified men and women to occupy important positions. Even if these privileged individuals are honest and well-meaning, they rarely resist the temptation of allowing the use of favoritism, nepotism, bribery and other harmful practices.
4. Another important

recommendation consists in giving school boys and girls an adequate preliminary training in citizenship, including civics and community problems.

Rulers, governors and leaders of thought are required to satisfy the people's economic, social and cultural needs in return for the money they receive from the national treasury. They are equally required to enlighten the people regarding their rights and duties as well as those of the leaders, governors and other people in power.

A favorable sign of change, especially in Lebanon, is the presence of three women among the candidates for the parliamentary elections of 1992. After seventeen years of imposed militia rule and civil war, women are trying to assert themselves.

I cannot help admiring the leaders of the Women's Movement in Argentina, who insist on a 50/50 share of representation in Parliament and reject all compromise.

Winning a parliamentary seat is a privilege which every ambitious citizen wishes to have. It means a huge main, on both the financial and the social side, in return for a minimum effort on the part of the winner, since it simply requires attending a minimum number of sessions during the year. It is, as they say, the easiest and shortest way to wealth.

Why should women who form half of the population, everywhere, be deprived of sharing this privilege on an equal basis with men, as long as the constitution gives the right to do so?

### Footnotes

- (1) Newland, Kathleen, *Women in Politics: a Global Review*, Washington, D.C. 1975.
- (2) Information about women in leadership positions is mostly taken from *Sisterhood is Global*, compiled, edited and introduced by Robin Morgan, Anchor books, 1984.
- (3) "Challenge in the East", *Time*, December 3, 1990, No. 49, p.48
- (4) "All in the Family", *Op.cit.*, p. 51
- (5) "A Thriller in Manila", *Newsweek*, May 25, 1992, pp. 28-30.
- (6) *Time*, *Op.cit.* p.47.
- (7) Abdel-Kader, Soha. article published on "Tendencies of Social Science Research on Women in the Arab World", in *Al-Dirasat-ul-Ijtima'iyya 'an-il-Mara'a fil-'Alam-il-Arabi*, original english edition "Social Science Research on Women in the Arab World", UNESCO, 1984. (Al-Muassasat-ul-Arabiyya lid-Dirasat wa-n-nashr).
- (8) "Participation of Women in Politics during the War". *Al-Raida*, No.50, August 1990, pp.3-4.

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