

Wasila Tamzali

Not Enough Debates

Interview by Randa Abul-Husn

Societies which develop and progress are those who can debate their issues

Wasila Tamzali is Head of Women's Rights at the UNESCO. She was in Beirut in the Spring to attend UNESCO's Conference "The Rights of Women in Lebanon: Situation and Perspectives in the Context of National Reconstruction." (See Al-Raida #61, pg.19). Leading members of the Lebanese Women's Council, its sister organizations and others working on Lebanese women's issues attended the Conference and gave their reports of the situation in Lebanon, and what needs to be accomplished.

Although Tamzali's dedication to the women's cause is exemplary through years of militance and activism with UNESCO and a very deep personal commitment to the cause, her bond with Arab Women is special because she is an Arab herself, an Algerian. It was in Algeria, in the sixties, that her work for equality began, and Lebanon, as early as then, seemed as the model for women rights in the Arab World.

After various visits to Lebanon during the past two decades, Wasila Tamzali got a closer look at this Lebanese model. She made the following analyses of the Lebanese situation based on observations from Lebanese women's discourses during the recent conference and throughout the years.

• What general impressions did you make of the Lebanese women's movements and the issues raised at the UNESCO's conference on women's rights?

What interested me most was the blank, or, in other words, what was not said, namely the religious-communal differences of Lebanese women. The papers presented ignored religious-communal characteristics of the Lebanese society and how they affect women, family and status. I can understand that the Lebanese people are coming out of the war and do not want to discuss them.

This aversion, however, hinders a comprehensive description and understanding of the situation because the confessions and their communities are basic units in this society. A society must continuously analyze itself, and in doing so, cannot address some parameters and neglect others. We must examine economic, educational, political, and other variables as well as the religious-confessional ones if we want to understand the differences between men and women in Lebanon.

For instance, I notice that the leaders of the Lebanese Council for Women did not question the Personal Status Code.

• They replied that there are no confessional differences within the Council and that their target was Lebanese women in general rather than particular groups.

I am not sure this strategy represents unity. Intellectual analyses and discourse are based on debates, and opposition is the basic component of any debate.

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• **Opposition in Lebanon lead to a 16 year old war. What are the possibilities that this debate will not led to more conflict?**

People must understand that questioning and debating are the only means for discussion and understanding. The process comprises an entire education. It is the lesson of modernity, i.e. a lesson in politics, and democracy.

Societies which develop and progress are those who can debate their issues. There are two kinds of discourses: the discourse of knowledge and the discourse of power. Intellectuals and researchers bear the responsibility of acquiring knowledge to help us understand the women's cause. Power, on the other hand, is the prerogative of politicians.

• **Did the papers presented at the conference -- about health, culture, law, labor, population and others -- constitute a discourse of knowledge?**

No. Like I said earlier, knowledge must be comprehensive, not selective. Such intellectual discourses should be more revealing and revolutionary. By virtue of their different ideas and ideals, intellectuals form the opposition

and must risk breaking away from their communities. If you cannot take that risk you are not an intellectual. In the women's movement the role of the intellectual is very important. Hence, the problems of women, of the family, and in many ways the gender relations must be explored, examined and understood in great depth.

• **Did the participation of UNESCO's and government officials in this conference imply a discourse of power?**

No. The discourse of power lies in the hands of the people who hold power.

• **Many changes in women's status occur as a consequence of structural modernity independent of intellectual inquiry and activism. Will structural modernity and new life styles produce the change in attitudes needed for women's liberation in Lebanon?**

I am not a specialist on Lebanon as such. But it is a very difficult country to understand, and a fascinating one at the same time.

Lebanon, throughout the history of

the two religious communities (Moslem and Christian), has devised for itself a democracy which protects the rights of the various communities. This is not democratic because democracy entails universality, meaning that we must have the same rights for all rather than different or separate ones for each. Rights for each community represents the Lebanese model of democracy. It is the most sophisticated organization of tribal respect.

I find the Lebanese model very interesting, because it contributes to our attempt to understand democracy. In Europe we are reviewing Comte's principle of equality and liberty: we are all equal and should have the freedom to be different. Equality and liberty should not be separate. But in Lebanon there was no attempt to assert both because equality was guaranteed by different rights.

The women's situation is very similar. Women want to be equal and different. In other words, they want to be equal in the world of men and they want to remain women. We will not do women justice if we do not learn to understand the relationships between these two concepts.

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Marriage is as much an obligation for young men as it is for young women. The problem is that women evolve much faster. Therefore, despite certain gains, the young woman loses a lot in marriage. Whereas, men, by virtue of the privileges guaranteed in society do not lose as much. The debate can take an interdisciplinary approach. There are political, economical and gender-relational perspectives. Nonetheless and irrespective of the nature of the conjugal relationship, systems and laws place women in an inferior position. A woman has to take all of these conditions into consideration.

What I want is a law that guarantees equality between husband and wife. There can be no negotiations on the issue of equality. I will go on doing the dishes and the cleaning but it will have to be my choice.

Thus, Tamzali's observations on the women's issue in Lebanon, Tamzali focused on the urgent need for change through research and discourse, and consequently, a deeper understanding of role, status and the family. Hence, in addition to discourse and debates could we infer the need for explicit policies for women in society, for many of the behavioral debates that have taken place have gone on endlessly rather than effectively. What policies are there for women and how representative and reliable are they in terms of protecting women's rights? Could the examination of public policies and policy-making be the first chapter of effective discourse and analysis for a better understanding of women's status and role in society?

• Much of the resistance to feminism in this part of the world is due to the fear from a haphazard imitation of the western model and consequent conflicts with traditions. Is this fear justified?

I think this is an imaginary problem, and these are arguments used by people who think they can control change. Culture is never fixed and it is never a voluntary condition. It is always changing. It is evolutionary.

• How do you explain the fact that young women in Lebanon are not active in the women's movement?

It is the same in France. Each generation benefits from progress made by the previous one. When these changes become insufficient, new demands will be raised. It is normal for a period of activism to be

followed by a descent like the one taking place now. Some say that the Feminist movement is like a snake, it keeps coming in and out all the time, but it is continuous and never stops.

We are the generation who voiced the first demands and consequently gender relations have changed significantly from what they were forty years ago. But to what extent are they different? The young women of today are the ones who will keep the movement alive and growing because they will ask for more than what we have achieved.

• It would seem that younger generations are confused between experiencing a modern, independent lifestyle and marriage expectations. How can this conflict be resolved in predominantly traditional and highly patriarchal societies?