

## AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF BEIRUT

*Maha Milki Wehbe, Ingenieur Agricole*

**T**hirty three years ago, **The Parks and Public Gardens Department** was established in the Municipality of Beirut. During the war period, the only male agriculturist in the Department quit and the Director, himself a professional, kept the work going exclusively by himself and without the aid of a secretary. In short, the scope of work in the Department was minimized to a near standstill.

I was the first woman to set foot in a predominantly male territory. Since I was employed, serious attempts by the Governor of Beirut, Nicolas Saba, have been made to consolidate the Department. Three young females and two male agriculture engineers were hired successively, all AUB graduates forming a homogeneous cooperative team in charge of forging a new picture of a war-torn city by introducing more plantations, flowers, and tidiness in public gardens.

Presently, the Department is in charge of every single green plant on side-walks (12,000 trees), medians between streets and the 13 public gardens in the city, in addition to the newly re-planted 300,000 square meters of *Horch* Beirut (Pine-wood Park). In the future it will take care of the downtown green area which is currently under the auspices of Solidere.

The job to be undertaken is really challenging considering the limited resources available. Some trees have been left to grow without pruning; some are in private domains and constitute a hazard to inhabitants, in which case the Department has to prune or cut them with the help of the Fire department.

The Department's fifty workers, with their average age of 60 have really depleted their potential and enthusiasm. They have spent the war years without being able to do their work efficiently and thus are used to tardiness and a slow work pace. Their whole outlook to work and working hours is different from ours - the newly employed- who are whole-heartedly willing to indulge in it.

Yes, it is difficult, at times, to make the older generation work within the new philosophy and discipline. Being a female is one of the obstacles; such people are not used to taking orders from a lady - young or old. To quote my colleague, Dana Mansour, the majority of the workers come from traditional backgrounds in the South and Mountain villages, and they are not very willing to obey a female superior and think it is either preposterous or funny.

Another problem is the lack of confidence in us.

As Dana often tells me, when she goes to any of the gardens with a technician, workers flock around him and are eager to take orders from him, although she happens to be the engineer and he her subordinate.

Mona Ammach, on the other hand, who is in charge of the Pinewood Park, was often not taken seriously by the agricultural technician, a young man employed by the Park's contractor. She had to shout at him to coach him into accepting her interventions.

Another major difficulty is the shortage in workers. For example, in the 20,000 square meter Sioufi public garden in Ashrafiyye an area I am in charge of and which hosts the department's main offices, only two workers are in charge of keeping it well-maintained and clean. Asking them to do something within their job-description takes, at times, the form of a personal request. At other times, they promise to finish a certain task but only accomplish a minimal part of it, and all sorts of health excuses are readily given. By way of punishment, the senior staff have the authority to deduct from their wages depending on the magnitude of the failure.

As days pass by, everyone in the Department is realizing that big changes are taking place. Personally, I am able to cooperate smoothly with other departments within and outside the municipality. Furthermore, fruitful cooperation takes place especially in one-shot events whenever the work load is intensive; cleaning workers, plumbers, electricians, fire department technicians and vehicles, truck and other facilities are then readily placed at our disposal. Help is also sought from Sukleen, and the water and electricity departments.

With time, patience, flexibility and more communication, employees are positively responding and becoming more used to the presence of females. Although the work is still at a slow pace, much is being done; the gardens are looking more beautiful especially that women are in charge of most of the green areas around Beirut. They are proving that they are up to the responsibility given to them. Our male colleagues help in the nursery, irrigation group workers, planting medians in the streets, and other jobs that have to do with trucks, motors, transportation, etc.

Challenges of different nature face women if they want to obtain good results and match those of their male colleagues. Fortunately, at the end, their talents are recognized. I speak from personal experience where, ultimately, I was appointed to the position of Assistant Director of Parks and Public Gardens Department of the Municipality of Beirut. It is finally "paying off".