

## DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS

By Myriam Sfeir

*If she truly wants to, the Lebanese woman is able to work alongside her male partner in any field. The Lebanese woman has a role these days in the Parliament, and I hope she'll also have an increasing role in the ministries. Women play a crucial role in contributing to the family income. You can even find a number of women in the Lebanese armed forces nowadays. Lebanon really needs its women, and Lebanese women have to fight for what they want. Both women and men must support each other in the hard fight to regain our leading role not only in the Arab World but internationally. (Nimat Kanaan, Al-Raida issue # 70/71, 1995)*

In 1993 Nimat Assaad Kanaan<sup>1</sup> was appointed Director General of the Ministry of Social Affairs after serving the Ministry for 35 years. She is the first and youngest woman to occupy such a position.

Kanaan was brought up in a conservative family atmosphere along with three other sisters and a brother. Kanaan recounts: "Instead of self-reliance women in the Arab World are taught to rely on the family in every way. Yet, unlike most Arab families, we were not brought up to think in this way. My father knew that he would not always be there for us, and given that our only brother suffered from down syndrome my sisters and I were taught to think for ourselves and were encouraged to develop our creativity and individuality." All the Kanaan girls insisted on pursuing their education. They were backed by their father and eldest sister Najla, now a judge at the state council who valued education, contrary to their mother who always feared that if her girls were educated no one would want to marry them.

Kanaan graduated with distinction from the American School for Girls in Tripoli (TGS) at the age of 13. Owing to her excellent performance, she was granted a full scholarship, from the school, to study either at Beirut College for Women (BCW) or at the American University of Beirut (AUB). In spite of the scholarship she received, her parents were very much opposed to the idea of sending their daughter to college

in Beirut. Kanaan explains: "We lived in Tripoli and sending me to Beirut was a very difficult decision given that I was very young and had to live away from home for several years." Thanks to her principal at TGS her parents finally agreed and the choice fell on BCW because it was an all girls' college. Kanaan maintains: "My dream was to study medicine and become a doctor; however, I knew it was out of the question. My parents strongly opposed my decision to attend a mixed university so I opted for BCW even though it did not offer the degree in question."

Throughout her life Kanaan was adamant to get ahead. She recounts: "Landing a top ranking position was never an incentive urging me to work harder for since childhood I have taken everything I did seriously. Even though I wanted to succeed, I never craved either power or fame." Kanaan asserts that the essential elements for success are hard work, dedication, devotion and self confidence. Even though her superiors were greatly impressed by her impeccable, diligent, and meticulous work performance, luck played an important part in her promotion: "In 1967 the Director of Social Services was transferred to another department, and I applied for the vacant position and was accepted. The timing was right and I was daring enough to take the plunge; however, I must admit that I was chosen for my competence and potentials. I was able to prove to my superiors that I was capable of doing the job."

Kanaan challenges the claim that women are less equipped to work in the public sphere: "Women are as competent and efficient as men. In fact, they are more patient, meticulous, creative, artistic, and perseverant in their work. Yet, this does not mean that all women are achievers and all enjoy high levels of proficiency." According to Kanaan, a female colleague who does not pose a threat is willingly accepted and liked by her male counterparts: "Men favor a female co-worker for the feminine spicy element she adds to the work atmosphere; however, when she becomes a rival jeopardizing their chances to promotion, they fail to accept the competition. Men believe that when a promotion is available they should be entitled to it, and priority should go to them. They will declare war on women who dare deviate from the norm and tread on foreign grounds. In fact, they will use everything in their power to hinder and hamper her route to success."

When asked if she has experienced any



discrimination herself Kanaan admits that prior to 1974 she never did: "Even though my name came up several times, in 1974, when the government wanted to select a Director General for the Office of Social Development, the government rejected the proposal. Their pretext was that it was still very early for a woman to occupy a decision making position."

Kanaan values team work and strongly believes that the effort and work of each and every team member is integral to the success or failure of a department. The importance of a director stems from his/her ability to lead the working team. According to Kanaan, leadership is a talent, it is an inborn trait in human beings and forms an integral part of one's personality. She holds that "women should develop and cultivate this talent because their failure affects their fellow women, whereas man's failure affects him individually and does not reflect on other men. It is my belief that women ought to exert extra effort if they want to progress and succeed. Men are confident and constantly reassured for they are in their natural element and setting. The work place is their domain."

Kanaan argues that equality between men and women is not absolute because the sexes differ by nature. They have different qualities and characteristics that complement each other and brings about a balanced life: "To me equality is in having equal access to opportunities." Kanaan criticizes working women who require special privileges and seek favoritism: "Women



**NIMAT ASSAAD KANAAN**

*Born in Bouday - Baalbeck, Lebanon, she graduated from the American School for Girls in Tripoli and attended the Beirut College for Women where she majored in Educational Psychology. She also attended the American University of Beirut and graduated with an MA in Education, Psychology and Social Work. Her work experience started in 1958 when she taught English for about two years. In 1960 she started work as an administrator at the Office of Social Development. It did not take her long to move on. In 1963 she was promoted to head of the Social Assistance Department. She was then appointed Acting Director of Social Services, and one year later assumed the position of Director of Social Services. In 1972 she became Acting Director General of the Office of Social Development (currently General Directorate of Social Affairs) a position she occupied for around twenty years. In 1992 she was promoted to the position of Acting Director General of Social Affairs at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. She has represented the Lebanese government in several regional and international conferences and has participated in numerous workshops and training sessions. She has also published two field studies: "Social Welfare Services in a Voluntary Social Institution" and "Unmarried Mothers in Lebanon" as well as a book in Arabic on Social Services in Lebanon. She was presented with the Labor Medal of the First Order in recognition of services in the social welfare sector.*

condemn discrimination yet expect to be treated differently because they bear the responsibilities of the family. This is unacceptable." Despite the fact that women are saddled with responsibilities outside and inside the home, Kanaan believes that they should not complain for work outside the house was their choice in the first place. One's personal problems should remain a private matter: "Unlike my male colleagues I had a family to take care of. My three daughters and husband needed constant attention and I had to cater to their needs when I went back home. Yet, I never complained." Kanaan acknowledges the assistance of her mother and sister who helped her a great deal: "I often left my girls with them. Had it not been for them I wonder what I would have done."

Kanaan's greatest satisfaction is that her work was and still is appreciated: "I am always very pleased to hear that I'm considered a successful administrator in the Ministry." Kanaan admits: "I knew that I had to succeed for

failure would affect other women negatively. I was aware that my success would encourage the government to appoint more women to top ranking positions. I had an obligation to pave the way for other female successors. I wanted to ease their climb."

#### ENDNOTE

1 For more information about Nimat Kanaan check Al-Raida issue # 70/71, 1995.