

## IQBAL DOUGHAN: PRESIDENT OF THE WORKING WOMEN LEAGUE IN LEBANON

By Myriam Sfeir

**T**he Working Women League in Lebanon, founded in December 1994, is a non governmental organization under the umbrella of the Lebanese Women's Council. The league strives to assist working women in all fields by securing them with better working conditions. The following interview with Iqbal Doughan, the President and founding member of the WWLL attempts to shed light on the work done at the league.

**Myriam Sfeir:** How did the idea of founding a league for working women come about?

**Iqbal Doughan:** We were a group of working women dissatisfied with our current working conditions; we realized that even though we were actively engaged in the public sphere our situation in the legal and social system has not improved. Upon investigation, we found out that working women in most Arab countries are better off than those in Lebanon. The Lebanese labor law, promulgated in 1964, is still operative along with the social security law of 1960. So we came up with the idea of founding an organization to enlighten both men and women on the prevailing situation, encourage them to join syndicates, discuss their situation, and voice their opinion in order to convince the Labor Union to adopt their cause.

**MS:** Can you explain the primary focus of the WWLL?

**ID:** The WWLL was founded to advocate working women's rights. Its aims are to create a suitable working environment which enables working women to be productive. It includes working women who are wage earners in the public as well as the private sector. Among the objectives of the WWLL is to assist working women in the different fields and to establish better working conditions that would in turn improve their conditions both socially and economically. The league strives to preserve the rights of working women in terms of salary, promotion, and type and hours of work. It is also engaged in consciousness raising where working women are encouraged to work, join

syndicates, and actively participate in the public sphere. At the same time, it is involved in awareness campaigns where it organizes training sessions, lectures, and debates and attempts to secure better relations between working women in all institutions in order to reinforce the spirit of unity as well as the active role women play in all fields. It also promotes and revives hand work in order to preserve Lebanese culture.

**MS:** Tell me more about the work currently undertaken at WWLL?

**ID:** Among our basic concerns is amending the current discriminatory laws related to pension, retirement age, indemnity, maternity protection, child care facilities, sexual harassment, etc. We are working on implementing child care facilities in all institutions by trying to persuade the government to promulgate a law requiring employers to provide working women with child care facilities.

Employers ought to be familiarized with the numerous advantages of having child care centers in order to ensure more productivity, uninterrupted reporting at work, and willingness to work extra hours. This law would benefit all working women especially the poor ones who suffer the most. Since they can't afford to send their children to day-care centers, they often leave them with their mothers, sisters, mothers-in-law, and neighbors, and one can imagine how difficult it is for both mother and child.

Working women in other Arab countries are better off for they have better policies and privileges. For instance in Syria each organization with 10 female employees ought to have a day-care center. We are working on improving the current situation, and hopefully something positive will come out of it. Our organization was the first to broach on this issue for we consider motherhood to be sacred, and women ought to be assisted with their double burden.

We are also working on revising the existing maternity protection laws to accommodate all employed women. Owing to the fact that some working mothers are entitled to 40 days' maternity leave while others benefit from a two month leave, our aim is to unify the maternity leave period. Given that

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Lebanon has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) the best thing to do is to adopt the approved maternity leave period specified by the convention, namely 10 weeks. In so doing, all working women would enjoy the same privileges.

Furthermore, we are trying to amend some of the existing laws that blatantly discriminate between male and female employees. In fact, we have succeeded in raising the maximum flying age of female flight attendants to sixty years of age. Previously, female flight attendants were required to stop flying at the age of 50. In spite of some achievements we have a long way to go since numerous labor laws treat female employees as second class citizens. For instance, in theory all employees are entitled to a pension which passes on to their spouses and children after their death, however, in practice a husband can collect his wife's pension only when he can prove poverty or physical incapacity. Moreover, a female employee, unlike her male counterpart who is entitled to

compensation for his wife and children, can have compensation in certain cases only: if she is the head of the household due to widowhood, the husband's physical disability, his absence where no contact has been established for a period not less than a year, and divorce where her ex-husband fails to pay her alimony. Furthermore, the retirement age for men in some professions is sixty and sixty - four, while that of women is fifty and sixty respectively. Besides, unlike men who are entitled to seventy-five percent of medical expenses, working women only receive fifty percent. All these laws



**IQBAL DOUGHAN**

*Iqbal Doughan was brought up in a middle class family that valued education. She never experienced any discrimination and was given the same educational opportunities as her brothers. She majored in Law at the Arab University of Beirut, and while still studying she taught in several public schools. She is an appeal lawyer and is the first woman director to head the Regie in Lebanon. She is the Vice President of the Lebanese Women's Council, a legal advisor to the League of Women's Rights, and a member of various legal institutions and non-governmental organizations.*

outside the house. The family also falls short of assisting working women with the heavy load they are saddled with. Working women are the only ones capable of improving their lot through changing their family's attitude towards domestic work. I believe that consciousness raising is a very important factor supporting this change. Husbands and children ought to learn that house work is a family responsibility and not the mother's alone. Furthermore, new laws should be promulgated to help female employees. Change will come about just give it time.

**Prevailing working conditions fail to accommodate women's dual roles as mothers and workers outside the house.**

ought to be rectified and this is our main concern.

**MS:** Have you received any complaints from sexual harassment victims?

**ID:** Several women who have been sexually harassed at work have visited our office and recounted their experiences. Yet, on the whole, sexual harassment cases go undocumented in Lebanon. Given that sexual harassment is not punishable by law and owing to the fact that women are always blamed for being harassed, they are discouraged to talk about such incidents and rarely file for complaints. Most of the cases we came across were ones where the female employee either left her job or was fired by her boss. Yet, unfortunately there are a lot of cases where women are coerced to exchange sexual favors in return for their job. Most of these cases involve poor women who need the money they earn very badly.

**MS:** Any advice you would like to communicate to working women?

**ID:** Prevailing working conditions fail to accommodate women's dual roles as mothers and workers