



Round Table

Women's Role in Politics: The Quota System

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Women's Role in Politics: The Quota System was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World last March. The participants were Azza Sharara Baydoun, Iqbal Doughan, Najla Hamadeh, Mona Khalaf, Linda Mattar, Joseph Moawad, and Fawwaz Traboulsi.

- Are you for or against the quota system? Why in both cases?

Najla Hamadeh: Women's weak political participation in Lebanon is a symptom of the current political system based on family, regional and sectarian representation which is preventing women from entering the political arena. Moreover, in light of the current political situation, women are focusing on Western imports and are preoccupied with Western thought and modernity. I strongly believe that when you concentrate on one thing you tend to forget all the other things. Women are taken by the West and Western thought so they tend to think that wearing Western clothes, studying in foreign universities and earning a good salary implies modernity. They fail to participate in the political game and they forget the initial struggle and the cause that they are fighting for. The goal should not be personal benefit but collective.

Implementing the quota system will only take place when Lebanon becomes a modern democratic country in the true sense of the word i.e. when citizens come to represent their country and not their religion or family. Moreover, given that women have to an extent adopted the West as the norm, they fail to tackle pressing concerns in their society.

I am for the quota system because it imposes a role model in society. It would be ideal if these women did not come from political families (with due respect to everyone).

Mona Khalaf: I am against the quota system. It did not solve the problem of family-based political representation.

Hamadeh: It is true that the Quota did not solve anything, but my point is that if there is a quota system I am against women being selected according to their family's political history. I am for representation according to categories namely farmers, workers, professional unions, etc. If the purpose of the quota in Lebanon is to consecrate and legitimize the current political system, then I am against it. There is no point in calling for it. The quota should start changing things.

Linda Mattar: The issue of the quota is complicated. We, women, have always participated in politics because the personal in our lives is political. Even though we are not policy makers, yet, we are active participants in the political life of our country through our work with NGO's, associations, political parties, workers and professional unions, etc. We are not decision makers nor are we present in decision making positions to impose change. The idea of a quota system came about after much investigation. It was not invented by us, it is found in several countries all over the world. Despite the fact that women are productive in all spheres, namely academic, agricultural, economic, human, etc. and have pivotal roles in various sectors, they still lack decision-making powers. Moreover, in most cases they are not allowed to voice their opinion in political matters. In view of this situation, the Beijing conference highlighted the quota system as a solution to the problem. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), calls, though not explicitly, upon signatory countries that have ratified CEDAW to quicken the pace of women's participation in political decision. What does that mean? Nothing other than adopting a quota system. If you ask me how should we



Fawwaz Traboulsi

apply the quota, I will answer that I don't know, because implementing a quota requires much study and research. In Lebanon we are presently calling for a quota of 10%

I strongly believe that if we have the means to change the Lebanese electoral system, the need for a quota will disappear. In Lebanon no sect, family, or party encourages women to run for elections. Those who oppose the quota system hold that it is a shame for women to beg for a position through quotas. If so, then it is unacceptable for Christians and Muslims to beg for quotas in political representation. I think the shameful element is in the fact that we have very few women in leadership positions. Why are we afraid of a quota system if we, as women's organizations, are able to educate women on the importance of electing women representatives who have gender-sensitive political agendas?

Fawwaz Traboulsi: I think there are two points we need to consider from a purely feminist point of view. No matter what the political system is, we should adopt the quota system. The purpose of quotas is initially to ensure equal gender representation in politics and not to change the system of sectarian political representation. Had the discussion been geared towards changing the current political representation in the country, then the quota system doesn't feature in this discussion. If we want to change the current situation and adopt the quota than we should try to come up with a new electoral system.

Iqbal Doughan: What we want is democratic representation. In European countries rarely do they object about the quota because their system is different. Women want a new system.

Azza Sharara Beydoun: I am against the quota system, in view of the fact that the prevalent electoral system will reduce its desired effects to a quantitative addition of women to the parliament. Those who are bound to be elect-



Iqbal Doughan, Najla Hamadeh,
Azza Beydoun

ed are list members who pledge allegiance to its head. The prominent head lists in Lebanon are not famous for their sympathy towards women's issues and concerns. Hence, any woman who would be elected under these circumstances will have a narrow margin of political as well as legislative freedom in dealing with these issues and concerns.

If a woman deputy is to represent women, (as well as men, of course) she should be conscious of women's issues that have been put forth and elaborated in the past 50 years or so by the women's movement in Lebanon. She should, furthermore, join effort with this movement in its attempts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. A woman deputy who is not dedicated to this formidable task is not much use to women.

Furthermore if she is not present as a "more of the same" contribution to the parliamentary life, she should be willing to approach the political, social, economic and educational issues of our society through what may be designated as a "woman's perspective". Or she should have the skill to "look at the world through the eyes of women" - as goes the motto of the Beijing conference. This is not as idealistic as it may sound; the details of its practice is documented in the Feminist literature all over the world.

A quota system for women will probably follow the same criteria as the current quota system for men. Female deputies will be distributed among sects, families and other masculine/patriarchal and "natural" affiliation. I do not think that these affiliations constitute the proper areas that allow for a political experience for women, not to mention a distinct contribution to Parliamentary and legislative life.

Traboulsi: I still do not understand why you oppose the quota system.

Beydoun: Because it is misleading. It is based on the false assumption that a female deputy is necessarily sensitive to



women's issues and concerns. Needless to say a male deputy who adopts these issues and concerns is more valuable to us than a female deputy who is devoted primarily to her masculine based affiliations.

Mattar: Why not, once we apply the quota system, we will have both men and women in parliament.

Beydoun: What for? Women are already participating - as you say - in the political life of our country in different forms and places (members and leaders in NGO's, unions, associations, etc.). It is true they are not decision makers on national issues yet, but I am not sure the quota system, implemented within the obvious constraints, will allow them to make women friendly decision, much less gender sensitive ones. I am aware of the argument claiming that the abundance of women in the parliament allows for role models for female population to identify with. We already have those, don't you think? So the question remains what for?

Traboulsi: In order to allow half the society to participate in political life.

Hamadeh: To be honest with you, I no longer feel offended when I hear people saying "Let's leave feminist concerns and women's political representation aside when discussing politics" because, nowadays, I am convinced that our problems do not stem from the fact that men are active in politics and women are not. Our situation in Lebanon is much worse than that. Most nations have shifted from a feminist approach to a gender approach. We have failed to do so and still dwell in the past. I no longer sympathize with women alone, I sympathize with all individuals that are not represented, be they men or women. Before calling for equal representation we should work at the grassroots level to learn more about what we need.

Ideally those who should reach decision making positions should be individuals whose interests cater to the majority of the citizens. Unfortunately, this is not the case as most decision makers are individuals whose interests differ from that of the majority of the population. That is why we cannot over simplify the quota issue by saying we are with or against. The problem is much more complex.

The reason why we want women to participate in political life is because the end result will lead to more democracy and will take into account the benefit of the entire population. Even though we should work hard on the end product,

however, given the current political makeup of the country the issue of gender will never make a difference.

Doughan: I am against the quota system because we are still not ready for it nor will it make a difference anyway. I strongly believe that the absence of women from the political arena in Lebanon stems from social constraints in their traditional upbringing. Women in Lebanon are faced with formidable challenges when trying to attain political power. The family as well as society make sure to drum into the head of women the fact that they are unfit for politics. We are bombarded with phrases like "women cannot understand politics" and "women and politics don't mix". Before debating the issue of implementing a quota system, we have to examine where do women stand in the decision making and in the politics of the country. As women are we required to blindly approve the status quo or to introduce

positive changes. My question is "In light of the current political system, can we make a difference? and is it feasible to enter the political arena?" Is the quota the solution to all our troubles and will competent women reach top ranking positions? If they do, will anything really change?

Our struggle should be a national and feminist one. We women are half the population and therefore we should also attend to the issue of stereotyping prevalent

in our society. Enlightenment and consciousness raising will lead to informed choices. Women are conditioned to believe that they are unfit for political office and this is wrong. Education and action are key elements that will lead to women's empowerment. Moreover, forming a pressure group is essential and training women on leadership skills is a priority.

Joseph Moawad: This issue has been discussed endlessly and I don't know what to add to the current discussion. My question now is do we want any woman, just because she is a woman, to reach top-ranking positions or do we want her to spice up political life with her innovative ideas and program? We must note that not all women are honest nor are they all interested in ameliorating women's conditions. In fact some of the most corrupt politicians were women (e.g. Benazir Bhuto and Tanso Chiller)

Traboulsi: Lets stop putting the blame on our sectarian political system. Most Western countries have adopted the quota system not because their system is sectarian and family-based but because of disequilibrium in the balance of



Joseph Moawad,
Linda Mattar

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power between men and women. Besides, we should bear in mind that not all women make good politicians (the same applies to their male counterparts), there are corrupt women and honest women politicians. Moreover, we can not expect all women politicians to defend women's rights. Some are uninterested in feminist concerns.

Mattar: Society is evolving democratically. That is why we need a quota system in Lebanon. The quota is a transitional solution, it can never be permanent. NGO's, political parties as well as democratic committees are expected to facilitate the ascent of competent women to top-ranking positions. Workshops should be organized by these organizations to teach both men and women the importance of electing women. Moreover, discriminatory laws should be amended. The women elected should be competent because if unfit women reach positions of power and they fail to do what is expected of them, people will no longer elect women.

Khalaf: I am against the quota system because I believe that it consecrates the Lebanese political system that is sectarian and based on family affiliation. Most women who will reach somewhere will not get there out of personal effort but because of their connections. They offer the head of the list blind devotion and in doing so they become a puppet in his hand. I believe that we should not play the game according to men's rules because the system they abide by is a failing one.

We need efficient and competent women to represent us in



parliament. We should have a political agenda and fight for it till the end. If we do not achieve the desired outcome soon, we are bound to get there someday. Hence, it is a matter of time. Jumping on the wagon should not be our priority. Our basic

problem in Lebanon is that we lack genuine national affiliation. We have no allegiance to our country. Our loyalty goes to family, sect, money, etc. Now is our chance to make a difference given that we are not yet immersed in the dirty political game of men.

Moawad: Establishing quotas for women or rejecting them is not enough. We should reflect on the means of implementing the quota system.

Khalaf: The plan of action I am calling for goes beyond the quota system, women and citizenship. It has to do with the country as a whole. We should encourage men and women to work side by side. Our aim should not be to replace men by women. We should look for competent individuals be they men or women and encourage them to work together.

Moawad: The reason why the quota system is gaining a lot of attention nowadays is because of the huge gap between our part of the world and the rest of the world. Can we impose modernity and are we ready to learn from other country's experiences in order to impose positive changes. We should concentrate on lobbying. If we all leave this room convinced that quotas are a must, then we should lobby and draft a plan of action to impose the quota system. Despite the fact that I am against a quota system, I will help out.

Forthcoming Marriage and the Arab Woman