



## Women in the Lebanese 2000 Parliamentary Elections:

# What Political Participation are “they” Talking About?

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*In the Beginning, there was the Word.  
Later, there was the Truth.  
Finally, there was the Vision...of equality for women.*

No positive outcome for Lebanese women was expected of the parliamentary elections 2000 - the third elections after the end of the war and the signing of the Taif agreement. At least not to those who knew a few things about the rules of the political game in the Second Republic. However, the number of female participants was phenomenal and unprecedented in the history of parliamentary elections in Lebanon.

The stakes on women were high, but the play was unfair, unequal, and the players inexperienced, moreover disorganized. Above all, they were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea... the devil of confessional divisions and the raging sea of dollars.

Yet, even before the start signal was lowered to begin the electoral race, women were caught up in a societal campaign to support or reject “the quotas for women in the parliament,” a law that would give women a reserved proportion of parliamentary seats. Once again divisions confused them. Yet, despite uncertainty, they strode forward and engaged in battle. Were they Mavericks or visionaries?

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The women who struggled for election numbered sixteen. There were four represented independently in Beirut: Ghada Yafi, Linda Mattar, Jamale Hermoz and Roula Hourri. Just one candidate, Ghinwa Jalloul, was fortunate enough to be included in the electoral list headed by Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, ex-prime minister at the time of the elections. Outside the Beirut area, in Mount Lebanon there were two candidates: Giselle Hachem Zard who stood independently and Gilberte Zouein, represented in the electoral list. In the northern district there were candidates MP Nayla Mouawad, Ghada Ibrahim, Layla Khazen and Zeina el Ali Merhabi. In the south, there were two candidates: Boushra Khalil (represented for the third time), MP Bahia el Hariri (once again elected deputy, after her former election in 1996 as the first Sunni woman candidate). In the Bekaa, there were three candidates: Norma Firzli (represented for the second time independently), Aklima Hamieh, and Nisreen Abdelsater.

The same number of female deputies were returned out of a total of 128 parliamentary seats, and these were yet three again - the newcomer being Ghinwa Jalloul. The increase in the number and proportion of female candidates, 16 out of 589, is a positive move forward compared with 1996, when there were 11 out of 645. All three owe their seats to men. Bahia Hariri, who is very active in parliament on education and women rights, was

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elected in the first place for being the prime minister's sister, and for the social work she has been doing since the eighties in the Hariri Foundation. Later, she succeeded in proving herself as an MP.

As for Nayla Mouawad, widow of the late president Rene Mouawad, although now considered as a political leader in her own right, she was also first elected as a compensation for the tragic death of her husband. In addition, Ghinwa Jalloul, a university professor, was a newcomer to the political club and perhaps made it by being on Hariri's electoral list, which rocked the votes of the capital in a real political earthquake, for various reasons.

More women were not elected due to many interrelated factors:

- A confessional political regime which offers limited choices to electors
- Inexperience in campaigning
- Infertile ground for breaking down old traditions
- Lack of solidarity between women's associations
- Poor economic resources
- Undemocratic systems

According to the Lebanese electoral law, parliamentary seats are distributed proportionately between confessions, thereby maintaining a national political balance. It has always been recognized that a parliamentary candidate also depends upon the blessing of his community's spiritual leader. The reluctance of spiritual leaders to recognize a woman's political status has been traditionally accepted for generations, while male dominance in spiritual leadership has been unquestioned.

Inexperience in campaigning pointed to the unmapped path of parliamentary elections for women. Faced with political and economic pressure, society depended upon the strength of a leader. Women were not sufficiently mature to take a strong lead and face up to their adversaries. Their speeches were too gentle.... they did not take the firm position needed on many essential issues, and they were hesitant about the implications of their new role. Electoral campaigns often remained little more than social occasions.

The infertile ground stems from local traditions and taboos. Lebanese communities traditionally view women as home-makers. The modern image of a career woman breaks away from these traditions, with all their implications. The working woman today, in many areas of Lebanese society, issues reverberating effects which inevitably "upset the boat" of local tradition, and nurture disturbances and animosity.

This did not help candidates who presented themselves in such a context. But then they did not have an alternative, such as political parties or even political currents. Some of them counted on family ties and friends but were let down at the last moment. Others were forced to recognize that although Lebanese society has made progress in terms of women's rights, it needs more time to mature democratically. So they could only lay the ground in preparation for recognition in the next round.

Apart from being divided over the quotas law project, women did not show much solidarity for each other, or for their cause. They were unable to agree on one candidate to whom they could offer all their support in their own region. And under the slogan of electing "the best" in an illusionary democracy, their (non-feminist) votes were just wasted, gone with the wind, while they were fooling themselves thinking that they were voting for "the best," regardless of sex. Women movements multiplied press conferences and speeches, but failed in forming some kind of a solid bloc that would force one candidate onto the electoral lists in each region, regardless or even according to the religion of those women.

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Being elected to parliament has become a good investment for individuals in Lebanon, and men are willing to spend fortunes in the race to the parliamentary seat if they have to. And they have to, since a seat on what called "the bus" or "the bulldozer" has to be bought. Except for a few, most women did not have this kind of money, and even those who had it, misused it. Hopes for success were drowned in the raging waves of

inopportune timing and the costs effected by inexperience.

Lebanese women and men were equal for once, for being victims of the undemocratic systems in the elections of 2000. All the Lebanese candidates, but especially women, were subject to intimidations, pressure or bribery. These were the real choices of Lebanese citizens in the first election of the third millennium, and that is how they elected their MPs ...with few exceptions.

The Word was verbal encouragement to women, inviting them to join the political club. The Vision was to establish equality of rights in parliamentary elections. The fact is that there is no fertile, democratic ground to give a chance to women, nor a political decision to do so. In this same traditional society and a confused political regime, women still have a long way to go. But in actual reality, they do not stand a chance.