



“Quota” in the Field: “My Lady Take Your Place.”

Hind Soufi Assaf

Researcher and Human Rights Activist

Under this title, Hind Soufi Assaf conducted a study aimed at identifying the impact of the quota system on different categories of Lebanese society and the possibility of implementing the right to a “share” in the political domain. It also sheds light on the problems likely to result from the introduction of such a procedure.

Research Methodology

The survey was based on the following:

1. A questionnaire,
2. A series of meetings with youths, students and women belonging to different social categories,
3. Preparatory meetings and workshops,
4. A film documenting the elite, political and popular points of view,
5. Surveys that focused on women’s participation in municipal elections.

While meetings focused on raising and advocating the issue of women’s participation in decision-making, surveys aimed at defining women’s political situation in a scientific way. The following questions were asked:

1. The general attitude towards the “Quota”: Is the Lebanese society ready to accept the “Quota”?
2. Does Lebanese society accept the idea of artificially induced change, or does it prefer natural and slow development?
3. In terms of percentages, what does Lebanese society expect in this stage from politics in general and from women in politics in particular?
4. What are the “Quota” percentages suggested by the citizens, and is the Quota appropriate for a society that already has a multiplicity of (sectarian) quotas?

Seven hundred and twenty six surveys were distributed to the youth (25%), home-makers (25%) women and men workers (25%).

The committee for Planning and Research in the Lebanese Women’s Council sorted out and decoded the survey results.

Results Interpretation

A. Women’s Participation in Political Decision Making
Seventy-five percent of the men and 94 % of the women favour women’s participation in political decision-making. Only 17% of the Lebanese reject women’s participation in politics justifying their attitude by the following:

- ‘Current circumstances’ do not require women’s presence in politics.
- Man’s decision is denied so how about woman’s decision?
- This issue is not a priority at this stage.
- Politics is a corrupt world which is not compatible with woman’s nature.

Some answers were attributed by the author to tradition and misunderstanding of religious issues:

- Women have incomplete minds and faiths.
- If her testimony is not accepted in court, how can she be entitled to rule?
- The traditional and natural role of a woman require her to focus on one of our foremost sacred social values, the family.

Who are the Opposers?

Most of the opposers (80%) are young men. Some justified their fears by saying that: “Woman’s freedom will be at the expense of family values.”

Overall, society has become clear about the importance of women’s participation in politics.

Why do people support women’s participation in politics?

1. Women’s efficiency and academic achievement. Most of the answers included such terms; although “academic achievement” is not considered a priority to the voters who essentially elect candidates they personally know or those who would help them when needed. This has been confirmed by a survey that was simultaneously carried out by the Lebanese Women’s Council around the same year. The survey showed that 74% of people base their choices on their personal interest rather than their convictions.



2. Terms related to human rights were also mentioned.
3. Woman is half the society.
4. Some answers, especially those given by women, reflected a special awareness of gender roles. However this category remains a minority.
5. Three percent of the women respondents talked about regaining "power".

B. The Quota as a Concept

60.25% of the women in the sample (sometimes "spontaneously", and almost "aggressively"), support the quota (Table no. 4), compared to only 44% of the men. Rejection was justified by the following reasons:

1. The Quota is a compulsory procedure.
2. It is contradictory to democracy.
3. The Lebanese political system is already based on sectarian quotas.
4. The Quota is a women's privilege, while women reject all forms of discrimination against either of the sexes: "This is the easy way out, women have to work harder," according to one respondent.
5. The Quota will be difficult to apply in Lebanese society in a fair and equitable manner among all regions and sects.
6. I object to the Quota because it is a "cheap way that contradicts women's femininity", one man said. Quota is "offensive for women"; it makes them look weak. Accepting it would be "opportunistic".

The Quota was accepted for the following reasons:

1. It is a transitory and supportive procedure.
2. It gives women the chance to demonstrate their efficiency.
3. It allows women to enjoy their rights as human beings.
4. Quota is a procedure that runs parallel to the process of change. It is a chance to get to appreciate woman's political performance.

C. Fighting for the Right to Share

The difference between women and men's answers is clear. While more than 70% of the women expressed their desire to fight for implementing the Quota, men were reserved; only 33.74% of them answered positively.

Which means will civil society employ in order to effectively support women?

The author says that this question should have been asked in a direct manner. She explains that 90% of those who said they would fight might not go beyond signing a petition in support of the quota, while refraining from participating in demonstrations, for instance. The author points out to the discrepancy that has always existed between thought and practice in relation to women's issues. She gives the municipal elections as an example, noting how women have not won enough seats and were practically excluded from the big cities. The author states that had women decided to use their right to vote, they would have been able to have a woman elected. However, most women from

the lower classes, even if they believe in women's role, do not exercise their right to vote and thus cannot be considered full "citizens". According to the author, this can be attributed to illiteracy, economic subordination, the social system and an inadequate political education.

D. Suggested Percentages for the Quota

According to the author, this point triggers sensitivities since the Quota is imposed on one sex for the benefit of another. She explains that the quota has proved to be effective on the international level because it has been associated with other procedures. She adds that it is unreasonable for instance to specify a quota of 30% for women in political decision making when women are almost absent from the economic and commercial decision making spheres. The sustainable and parallel development requires imposing the quota from the bottom of the ladder upwards into all the developmental fields. Otherwise imposing the Quota would amount to 'burning stages'.

Therefore, the authors suggests introducing a quota in conjunction with a number of procedures among which:

- An comprehensive governmental and supportive policy that forges a dialogue with advocates of women's rights.
- Legal procedures that aim at achieving equality in society.
- An educational policy that starts in the elementary classes.
- Spreading the concept of the Quota and preparing the grounds a wide assimilation of the idea.
- Creating a women's lobby that advances these procedures and works towards imposing them when they are ignored.
- Getting familiarized with the international experiences, especially those of the developed countries. The author mentions that it would be a good idea to formulate feminist visions that suit us and are congruent with the field findings. The author adds that women's education is an inevitable tool for stimulating radical change in society. She quoted a researcher who attributes woman's lagging behind to her reticence in taking clear cut positions, accuses the women's movement of "wearing out", and calling upon it to get organized within a lobby that rises up to the challenges of the third millenium. The author considers this declaration, supportive of women's plight despite its harshness.

The author concludes that it is time for formulating a comprehensive vision in which men, youths and women participate. "This necessitates unifying the efforts. Woman's battle is first her battle with herself and then with the other," that author adds, "That's why, my lady, you are invited to to take a place for yourself. Or more appropriately to take your place."

Presented by Ghena Ismail

References

1. Profile of Sustainable Human Development in Lebanon.
2. UNDP, Beirut 1997. P. 106.
3. Prestige, Avril 98, 2.