

# Nayla Moawad: On Politics in Lebanon

Myriam Sfeir



Women in Lebanon have always been involved in the national struggle. Southern women resisted the occupation physically and emotionally. Moreover, during the Lebanese war, women were the unknown soldiers who kept the family together. Although, women were active participants in public life they were never given a chance to participate in politics on an equal basis with men. Men should encourage women to be involved in politics. We should move from rallying for women to integrating them in order to succeed in the world of politics.

**Myriam Sfeir:** what is your position on the Quota system?

**Nayla Moawad:** This question is not easy to answer, taking Lebanon into consideration. Given that I am a strong advocate of democracy, at first, I was against the quota system. However, as time passed, I became convinced that no woman would reach anywhere (politically) without the quota system. The solution is to introduce a quota with a low percentage allotted to women. I am against the 50/50 percent imposed in France as it implies moving from one extreme situation to another.

**MS:** Why are women absent from the political scene in Lebanon?

**NM:** We, in Lebanon, lack proper political education. Awareness campaigns are very important for people to accept women's participation in politics and decision-making. People have accepted women's presence in politics and public life, this was not very common 10 years ago. However, our patriarchal society, whose political system is based on family and sect still poses a hindrance for women. I strongly believe that political parties, with gender sensitive agendas, are major vehicles enabling women to reach decision-making positions in government. There is no doubt that women's presence in politics boosts democracy.

We, in Lebanon, have solid foundations for democracy but we lack proper democratic practice. Women's participation in politics will only take place once we have real democracy.

During the municipal elections I gave more than 103 lectures all over Lebanon in order to encourage women and girls to participate in political life. To my dismay, most women refused to fight till the end for fear of losing the elections and I found this ridiculous. It is not the end of the world if one loses, in any political race there is a winner and a loser and the most important thing is for one to try his/her utmost best.

Politics needs a lot of effort and hard work. I strongly believe that in order for women to win any political race they have to campaign early on. Women should not differentiate between political life and public life because they are not different. There is a common belief that in order to participate in politics one has to be in parliament. This is false because there are many politicians who are doing nothing and a lot of individuals who are not politicians and who are doing a lot. Actively engaging in public life through political parties, municipalities, trade and professional unions, non governmental organizations (NGOs), and universities is political work and will enable one to get to parliament.

Even though a significant number of women are present in politics, however, they still remain largely outside the realms of power and decision-making. No woman has held any ministerial position in Lebanon and only three women were elected to parliament. Women should prove themselves despite all the obstacles that hinder their participation in politics. They should forcefully push for what is rightfully theirs, even though they live in a patriarchal society. I often criticize the system although I am a product of it, however, I am trying to impose change.

**MS:** How can you explain the fact that you got the highest number of votes in the North during the past two elections?

**NM:** There are many reasons for that. Let's face it, I reached where I am today because of Rene, my late husband, and in a way I owe it all to him. When Rene was assassinated, people realized that he died for the sake of the country because he was very honest and attentive to national issues. Rene had a promising program that called for co-existence, national solidarity, unity, non-violent dialogue, etc. His program appealed to the citizens and given that I was to pick up from where he had started people voted for me. In addition, I am a woman and that was new as well. There hadn't been a woman in the parliament since Myrna Boustani was appointed thirty years ago. I was appointed in 1991 and the challenge for me was to prove to all my male colleagues, that I was up to the responsibility. I didn't feel uncomfortable being the only woman MP because most of my colleagues were friends of my late husband. Moreover, women in the North helped me tremendously. They massively voted for me. It is a misconception that women fail to support women, at least in my case. Last but not least, I tried to introduce new ideas that were unheard of as a president of the children's committee in parliament. I also tried to introduce a human element to political work through my work at the Rene Mouawad Foundation.

**MS:** Are you preparing your son to succeed you?

**NM:** To be honest with you, my son is very interested in politics. He is currently involved in various political projects. He was brought up to believe that he is responsible for this country. My late husband, on the day of his election, explained to Michel, our son, the critical period Lebanon

*Our meetings ought to be democratic in character and spirit. Men talk and women be silent.*



was passing through and told him explicitly "if anything were to happen to me, you have your mother, your sister and the country to take care of." Michel loves politics and I am not going to discourage him from participating in political life just because he is my son. If he is competent, which I think he is, than why not. However, I am planning to remain in parliament as long as I can serve and make a difference.

**MS:** What will you do once you retire from public life?

**NM:** I have a lot of plans that I am hoping to execute through the Rene Moawad Foundation (RMF). I am very much interested in women's rights and democracy and I strongly believe that forming pressure groups is very essential in order to lobby for change.

**MS:** Tell us about your work in promoting women's issues?

**NM:** I am an ardent advocate of human rights. This year I was chosen to head the parliamentary council to protect women and children's rights. (This committee that includes women and children indirectly implies that women's rights boil down to mother's rights which is wrong.) Previously, I worked with Laure Moghaizel and August Bakhus to amend several discriminatory laws concerning women and we succeeded. One can't broach on the subject of human rights and women's rights without thinking of Laure Moghaizel. She spent her whole life fighting discrimination against women. I also was a strong supporter of the municipal elections campaign. My other work is not directly related to women's issues but the end result is bound to benefit women. For instance, pushing for compulsory elementary education does benefit women because in poor and rural areas women are excluded from access to education because of limited resources and traditional beliefs.

**MS:** Is there anything you'd like to add?

**NM:** Yes, there is one very important point we have to understand, our politicians should be accountable if they fail to execute what they promised to fulfill. Accountability is very important and we have to learn to criticize failure in a constructive manner.