

Interview

Lina Dannaoui and Nisrine Mansour were interviewed by IWSAW staffer Myriam Sfeir for this issue of Al-Raida on Civil Society in their capacity as young professional women heading Non - Governmental Organizations.

Lina Dannaoui

Development and Municipality Studies Center (DMSC)

Lina Dannaoui, executive director of the Development and Municipality Studies Center, is a young woman who managed to make it in a very conservative part of Lebanon - North Lebanon.

After graduating from secondary school, she attended the American University of Beirut and graduated with a BA in Economics. She then traveled to England and majored in Development Economics at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS). Talking about her experience at SOAS, she asserts that “it was a wonderful experience, it helped me mature and become an independent person.” After graduating with a Masters degree, Dannaoui returned to Lebanon and started working for “Information International” a research center in Beirut. She worked there for around two years after which she was forced to return to Tripoli. Dannaoui recounts: “After two years of living and working in Beirut, my parents decided that it was time for me to go back to Tripoli. I don’t know what got into them, all of a sudden they started giving me hell. I think it was because I was going to live on my own. At first I was living with my brother, but once he graduated he had plans to leave for the United States, and so if I were to work in Beirut I had to live on my own. My parents strongly opposed the idea and after arguing incessantly for around 6 months, I complied.” Dannaoui admits that even though she didn’t want to upset her parents, whom she loves dearly, going back to Tripoli was her own decision. “At that time I was offered a part time teaching job at two universities in the North - Balamand University and Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) - and I considered it a challenge to be 24 and to be teaching university students, so I accepted the offer.

While teaching at Balamand, Dannaoui was approached to work on a feasibility study for a school opening in Batroun. By chance she met Wafa Shaarani, the wife of the president of the municipality of Tripoli, who was looking for people to organize training sessions on municipality management. The aim of the

project was to train presidents of municipalities (in the North) in administration, management of municipalities, budgeting, planning, etc. Dannaoui recounts: “I had no experience on the subject given that it was a very new concept. I started preparing for the training, along with a colleague, and it took us two months to come up with a good program. We had to devise our own program, and it proved to be a challenging experience. After completing the training, we printed a module and repeated the training 4 times where around 65 presidents of municipalities participated. With time, our training skills improved and the participants’ feedback on each session was always very encouraging.”



Lina Dannaoui

As a result of the successful training sessions, Dannaoui was chosen as Executive Director to the Development and Municipality Studies Center (DMSC), a non-profit, non-governmental organization specialized in municipal development. Dannaoui recounts: “Even though most founding members and the Board of Trustees of the Center were convinced that I would do a good job, some doubted my capabilities and were certain that I would fail. During my first 6 months working at the DMSC, I felt very much alone because the Board members and founders were not always involved especially early on. It was my first experience at management level and it wasn’t easy to learn everything: accounting, cost control, project development, project execution, public relations, fund

raising, internal management, etc. Being female and young was not always helpful. Many people were shocked upon finding out that I am the Executive Director. However, that didn't bother me. I am a person who is result oriented, so I tried to do my assignment to the best of my knowledge. My initial strategy was to meet with every single municipality president in the North to introduce the center and promote its activities. Some municipalities were welcoming and friendly, while others were not. Sometimes my age and gender got in the way, but I always managed to convince traditional individuals that efficiency has nothing to do with one's age and sex."

Dannaoui maintains that the Center, the first of its kind in Lebanon, was the fruit of the efforts of local experts and local presidents of municipalities of the North: "It came into existence thanks to the vision and determination of Tripoli's Municipal President." Dannaoui believes that municipalities, if developed, can play an important role in national reconstruction, local development, as well as in economic and social transformation, and thus ensure greater participation of all segments of society. The Center, Dannaoui explains, is engaged in a number of activities aiming at equipping municipalities of North Lebanon with the basic capabilities needed to assume an active role in society: "It investigates the situation of the municipalities in North Lebanon and works on building their strategic capacities. Moreover, the Center strives to improve understanding of the current system of administering local affairs. It attempts to overcome the difficulties involved in connecting remote municipalities with the central authorities and to other municipalities, and works on facilitating collaboration between municipalities and the central administration. Last but not least, it tries to improve relations between the municipalities and civil society."

Over 70 municipalities, out of the 156 in the North Governorate, have joined the Center: "We are very proud of the 50% participation rate in the North. We are working on membership development and are pursuing creative ideas to encourage more municipalities to join in the near future." With regards to funding, Dannaoui explains that the DMSC receives money from international organizations and donors as well as contributions from municipalities and membership fees of municipalities: "The main contributing municipal body so far is the union of Al-Faiha municipality

which includes Tripoli, Al-Mina and Al-Baddawi. As far as donors are concerned, we have worked with various funding organizations namely Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the National Democratic Institute, the USAID as well as AMIDEAST."

According to Dannaoui: "Even though the DMSC is still very much a local NGO that works with the municipalities of North Lebanon, there is a future plan to expand to other areas. I doubt it will take place in the near future given that there are around 152 municipalities in the North, and working with them keeps us very busy." Dannaoui goes on to explain that the DMSC is a small office whose staff fluctuates according to the need: "Since we became operational our staff members have fluctuated. We started off with two staff members and then more staff was needed so we became six and now we are back to three."

The DMSC is engaged in a number of activities aiming at ameliorating the conditions of municipalities in North Lebanon. The Center is involved in training and technical assistance to improve the administrative



capabilities of municipalities, thus enabling them to develop effective and innovative programs. The Center also undertakes projects based on the municipality's needs and priorities. In addition, it forms joint councils and committees to assist municipalities in their dealings with accredited international organizations in Lebanon in order to obtain funds needed for projects. Furthermore, it follows-up on projects presented by municipalities to the concerned ministries and serves as a databank for disseminating information. It organizes seminars, conferences and discussion groups that instigate debates and benefit presidents of municipalities, municipality staff, as well as municipality partners (NGOs, universities). Last but not least, the Center issues a monthly newsletter for the municipalities of the North.

Nisrine Mansour

Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Elections (LADE)



Nisrine Mansour

Other than the fact that she is the executive director of the Lebanese Association for the Democracy of Elections (LADE), she is a firm advocate of human rights, with great interest in gender issues, development and politics.

Nisrine Mansour studied Sociology and Anthropology at the American University of Beirut. After which, she landed her first job with Save the Children where she worked on economic development for women, namely income generating activities. Mansour recounts: "Save the Children had a group guaranteed lending and saving scheme targeted towards women. It provided loans for women who run very small businesses and guaranteed each others' repayment on trust basis. I worked there for one year and was based in the South." After that she worked as a training coordinator in an entrepreneurship development program for women at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs. The

purpose of the project was to help develop the entrepreneurial skills of women who have micro businesses or who were in favor of having a micro business. Following that Mansour took a year off to work on her Masters degree at the Lebanese University. Her Masters dissertation concentrated on local and rural development, and her thesis tackled the credit programs available in Lebanon.

After completing her MA, Mansour worked with the Cooperative Housing Foundation as the AMEEN program coordinator, a credit program which entailed individual loans for both men and women borrowers. Throughout her experience, Mansour sensed that microfinance tackled only the economic aspect of women's empowerment, and more focus was needed on strengthening women's status in society as independent active citizens. So, shortly after that she started working for LADE, a non-profit organization that aims at monitoring elections and strengthening democratic electoral processes. According to Mansour, "LADE came into existence on April 1996 and ever since it has been involved in monitoring elections. It was founded by a group of academics, researchers, journalists, lawyers, and civic activists eager to advocate electoral democracy in Lebanon. It is important to note that LADE is the first NGO concerned with electoral monitoring, voter's education, and awareness building in Lebanon. It has received wide support within the country and has around 250 members and volunteers from all over Lebanon."

On her work at LADE, Mansour explains: "Since I am the Executive Director, I coordinate activities along with the board and we set the plan of action for LADE and it's long term vision. With the help of the board, we work on raising funds, writing and developing proposals, networking, as well as communication both internally and externally." According to Mansour, "Since its inception, LADE has always had a very dynamic structure. Our secretary general and board members are exceptional, progressive, and gender sensitive. We have twelve board members, and since we strive to apply democracy internally, six of the twelve members are changed every year."

Mansour asserts that LADE strives to increase citizen awareness and commitment to electoral democracy, and is engaged in a number of activities that work on improving the electoral system and laws. It organizes training sessions where observers, voters, and citizens are trained on the techniques of monitoring elections. Mansour recounts: "We started off by organizing introductory meetings with citizens in different Lebanese regions to explain LADE's goals and activities. We also arranged several workshops and training sessions to educate voters on their rights and explain the elec-

toral process. We prepared and published a monitor's guide and kit to train volunteers on how to monitor and observe the elections. The guide and kit were distributed to the volunteers and voters during the training sessions. The monitor's guide contains information on the election law, the principle guidelines of monitoring the citizens' voting rights, the monitor's preparations the night before the elections, as well as information on how to monitor before and during the elections. As for the monitor's kit, it consists of a working agenda for the day of elections and observation forms to be filled out by the monitors in the field." Mansour strongly believes that: "In Lebanon there is an acute need to educate voters and especially women on their rights, and the importance of voting as a means of voicing their views. Many organizations are realizing that, and are insisting that their staff be trained on election monitoring."

According to Mansour, one of the most successful campaigns launched by LADE was "the National Campaign for Holding Municipal Elections". The aim of the campaign was to lobby for the holding of local elections, to participate in the formation of a civic network as a base for democracy, and to encourage citizen involvement in local governmental issues. According to Mansour, "the government wanted to postpone the municipal elections and appoint members and presidents of municipalities, so LADE initiated the call to hold the municipal elections. One hundred and twenty non-governmental organizations responded and participated in the official launching of the campaign. We struggled for it to be an independent coalition, and even though there were representatives from LADE, the campaign was also supported by many non-governmental organizations, newspapers, associations, business corporations, activists and volunteers from all over Lebanon. The campaign was on a national grassroots level and was able to collect over fifty thousand signatures in support of local elections. Since many people were in favor of holding the elections, we did not work alone, rather we worked collectively, mobilized our efforts, and succeeded in exacting change. The media also played an important role in promoting and propagating the campaign as newspapers and television stations covered the campaign activities in an effort to encourage citizens to sign the petition."

Mansour explains that LADE coordinates with the media on all activities and findings yielded. The media, in turn, plays an important role in disseminating information regionally and locally. The findings of

LADE's final report, which gives a detailed and comprehensive overview of the monitoring process, are published in local and international newspapers, and hence the Lebanese citizen is informed of the monitoring results and observations of the election process. Mansour adds that "the monitoring report of the elections was considered by the local and international press as a neutral and professional reference."

According to Mansour, there are several problems prevalent within civil society institutions. There are many good intentions and initiatives to face various problems in society, however, they should be translated



ed into a clear vision and action plans. There is a need for training and capacity building on volunteer and project management. Furthermore, there is a prevalent obsession with personhood in Lebanon, and organizations are often restricted to one person, namely its head, rather than involving efficient members in the decision making process. Not to mention the fact that some organizations are highly politicized. According to Mansour, various NGOs have to gear their efforts to be task-oriented and network with others to address common issues. In order to achieve more efficiency, we have to set our objectives and work collectively on realizing our goals. Indeed, more work is needed on the level of coalition building and networking and a change in the mentality is pertinent for one can't do things alone."

Mansour asserts that most civil society institutions in Lebanon are not democratic in their structure, nor are they gender sensitive in their approach. Women, who



constitute large numbers, fail to reach decision making positions because most civil society organizations are patriarchal, male dominated and traditional in structure. There is a general misconception that women know nothing about politics and shouldn't interfere in politics. Accordingly, women ought to put extra effort to prove themselves especially in local traditional communities. Mansour admits that women are sometimes to blame for the secondary position they are relegated to. Even though they have inherent capacities, they limit themselves and play secondary roles especially in political spheres and in democracy building. Nevertheless, one must admit that women in Lebanon differ from their counterparts in most Arab countries. Lebanese women have more opportunities and a better potential to make a difference, an asset that should be utilized. Women need more confidence and courage to break the glass ceiling and achieve better results: "The gender dimension should be introduced, and women should be chosen according to their merit. It is not enough to have a woman in a position, a qualified woman is what is needed."

Mansour ends by insisting on the importance of voting: "It is unhealthy to abstain from voting because voting is one's right and duty in a democratic system. The act of voting reflects on four years of our existence within the political system. It is our only opportunity to choose freely our representatives and demand solutions to issues of our concern. Even if we are not convinced about any of the candidates, we can take a stand by opting for a blank paper, but the least one can do is participate. We at LADE are working on changing this defective voting system by making every vote count. The people should have a say in the elections and if they opt for a blank paper this should be counted and stated in the official results."

Interview with founder

By Laila Shereen

- Can you speak to us a little about what Darna does exactly?

In 1995, a group of people of the city of Tangier decided to create a center for citizen's initiatives called Darna (our home), destined to become a center that would welcome debates about pressing social issues, in order to try and bring support to those in need and come up with alternative methods based on consultation with citizens and the support of the civil corporation.



Mounira El-Alami

Mounira El Alami, of Darna

We wanted freedom on a wider scale in the country, and it became possible to create an NGO without having to face the big issues of repression. To this date, political power is the exclusive prerogative of the central agencies, and all initiatives undergo strict control and sometimes are often repressed. It is clear that our vision is to break through a repressive system, and understand that without equality, no change is possible.

Darna has gradually become a place of freedom, counseling, exchanges and solidarity. Our first locality, Tangier, is situated in an impoverished neighborhood, and we immediately noticed the children and adolescents living on the streets. Facing this reality, we are trying to gain a better understanding of the needs of the youth in this town (drugs, poverty, delinquency, despair, homelessness, etc.). In 1995 we opened the first counseling center managed traditionally by men. Until today we were able to keep our autonomy from political powers and equality in decision making when it comes to internal issues. I think that this year, since we will be opening the community center for women, where women can decide everything, we will be able to evaluate the local male reactions.

- How do you see the state of women in NGOs in Morocco? Has their situation progressed or regressed?

It is clear that in Morocco, women who are frustrated for not being recognized in political organizations or syndicates, have invested in the field of NGOs. They have the decision making power and are well represented. For that reason, women from the local communities created and promoted the social and economical integration plan for women. They stressed on changing the "Moudawana" which is blocked today by the Parliament and the king, and the majority of the assembly power is male dominated. A current revolutionary notion manifested itself when the prime minister imposed, on his political party, a 20% quota of women in his last congressional meeting. This party came up with a list of women candidates to be elected at the September legislative elections. Therefore



we can say that at least the elite Moroccan women are moving with big strides. When it comes to the majority of women, their advancement, decision-making, and mobility, is related to the global dilemma of women's illiteracy rates, and to the success of the elite women against the regressive machismo and Islamic movement of the leftist and rightist male dominated culture.

I am optimistic that daily things are changing and believe in the actions taken by the NGOs. I am sure that women are becoming more and more of an internal pressure on families and on the social system. They are also becoming an external pressure on the local and national levels. It is a very complicated matter, but I think we will succeed.

Darna was created by a number of women, but today we are only two founders. The others were not able to follow our rhythm for personal reasons. Out of all the hosts, founders, advisors of Darna, the female element is the majority. Women are apparently more tenacious and more capable of performing daily tasks, as well as dealing with social disasters and violence caused by youth. They also have better listening and negotiating skills because they are more patient. Shall we say, "Is this the burden of the new century?"

The creation of Darna did not constitute any pressure on men. And I personally think that, it is only when the work is visibly important on the local and national levels, that it can be a serious competition against the "establishment."