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Session 1:

Empowerment of Women in Politics and Media

The Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women

Dima Dabbous-Sensenig

Director, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW)

Introduction

When I was asked to participate in this forum, I thought it was clear what I was getting myself into. As [then] Acting Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) and a media scholar, I thought this was going to be a presentation on media and gender, the intersection of two fields I am quite familiar with from an academic perspective. Easy, I thought. However, when I talked a few weeks ago with Ms. Nakash concerning the details of the presentation, she explained that she expected something personal. I wasn't so sure anymore. Not because I can't be personal, but because I have never done that in public, especially in relation to politics. This is indeed one situation, I thought, where I was not sure I wanted the personal to be political, no offence to sister feminists intended.

So for the coming few minutes, I will do my best to draw on the personal when talking about the political, hoping to strike the right balance. I know it is a fine line to tread: I wouldn't want to tip the balance one way or another by either drowning you in personal details, or boring you with academic jargon. So please bear with me while I give it a try.

Looking at the title of the conference, I saw the following key words: Empowerment, Women, Education, Politics, and Media, in addition to the roles of IWSAW and LAU in all that. Seven key words in total. Certainly a



Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig

lot of ground to cover in 20 minutes or so. But, since I was asked to be personal, I thought, maybe I can get away with being somewhat creative too. If I cannot cover all these areas in such a short time and give them their due, maybe I can instead figure out the common thread that links them all together and allows me to hit seven birds with one stone, so to speak.

So, which common thread would that be? Maybe I can just start with me! As a woman, I was empowered by my media-related education at LAU and then learnt about politics or how to be assertive and involved in power sharing when I was later on hired as a faculty member, also at LAU, and then went on to become acting director of IWSAW at LAU. I think I just got all seven key words in a single sentence, and managed to mention LAU three times!

Women, Media, and Politics

Allow me now to elaborate, going back to the idea of the common thread holding together all these apparently distinct key concepts. I believe this common thread to be the concept of "role model," basic to theories of social learning and identity formation developed in psychology, sociology, and media studies. Role models are "other persons who, either by exerting some influence or simply by being admirable in one or more ways, have an impact on another" (Nauta & Kokaly quoted in Schroeter, 2002). "People perceived as role models may be able to facilitate

[other persons'] development (and identity formation) via their support and guidance as well as via the degree to which they provide inspiration and modeling" (Nauta & Kokaly quoted in Schroeter, 2002). They help young people form notions "of who they are and who they want to be,"¹ with socialization being the most important factor in identity formation.

Such role models can be real life characters found in the immediate environment of young people, such as the family or the school, where values and ideals are usually taught. Indeed, when teaching one of the women's studies courses at LAU, I make it a point of asking students, male and female, who their role model in life is. A typical answer for female students is: my mother. Such a response is very endearing: We all love our mothers and will forever be grateful for their relentless love and sacrifice. But if I were only to have my mother as a role model in life, I know I would not be where I am today. My mother taught me the importance of unconditional love within a family setting, and she certainly is a role model in that respect. But as a homemaker, she was simply incapable of giving me advice on how to fend for myself in the real world, outside the sheltered environment of the home. Here again research on identity formation has shown that, for those teenagers and young people who do not find role models in their immediate environment, "media icons can provide an alternative source of socialization" (Skirvin, 2000). These media role models can be fictitious (characters in movies or TV series), or real (athletes, singers, artists, etc.).

Young people increasingly use the material available through the media to form their "self." Considering the crucial role played by the media role models when it comes to the formation and development of "individual identity" in young people, the following questions come to mind: What female role models are available to young women in the mass media? And to what extent do these role models empower young females and prepare them to be active participants in society? Knowing that studies have shown that males and females are more likely to select same sex people as role models,² an examination of media representations of women is essential to answer the above-mentioned questions. Who are the women portrayed in the media, especially on our TVs, the most ubiquitous and influential of all mass media?

Studies of media representations of women are replete with statistics and analyses that document the extent to

which the media continue to stereotype women, relegating them mostly to the private sphere or reducing them to sex objects, whether in advertising or regular programming. When, exceptionally, alternative representations of womanhood are available (and there are indeed serious omissions where powerful women or feminists are left out, just as is the case in most history books), these representations are rarely positive, preventing these media women from acting as role models in the process of identity formation in young female viewers (Dabbous-Sensenig, 2000).

Feminists and the feminist movement are often ridiculed when covered by the media. Where feminists are concerned, their coverage is rarely issue-oriented. They are instead physically scrutinized and caricatured as non-feminine, ugly, fat, old, hairy, bitter because of failed relationships with men, etc. (Wolf, 1993). Similarly, the few female politicians that exist and capture some media attention are treated more superficially and visually than their male counterparts, with the media paying more attention to their physical capacities than to their mental faculties. To cite a few examples, when Margaret Thatcher was in power, media interest in her was often concentrated on her sense of fashion (or lack thereof); just as during Madeleine Albright's notorious visit to Lebanon she made news headlines thanks to the length of her skirt when she met the Lebanese president. The most recent example of such unfair treatment of female politicians, as some of you who followed the German elections may have noticed, is that of Angela Merkel who attracted more attention with her bad hair day on election day than with the fact that she was on her way to becoming Germany's first ever female chancellor.

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This distorted, superficial media coverage of women in positions of power, which treats them as movie stars or as participants in fashion shows rather than as shapers of social and political reality, has several serious consequences as far as women and politics are concerned: Women's issues are neglected and excluded from public debate, and the activities of women MPs trivialized. More seriously, such coverage obliterates the important function women in politics can have as role models who can help inculcate the "right type of confidence" among younger women and encourage them to participate in political life (Karam, 1998, p. 38).

Indeed, research into the reasons that account for



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Mr. & Ms. Fadi Ismail and Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig at the pre-gala reception.

women's poor participation and interest in political life lists, among other factors, the lack of media support for female politicians and media insistence on portraying women in traditional, non-political roles. Another important factor is the lack of confidence in women's ability to deliver, whether on the part of potential female candidates or on the part of their voters (Karam, 1998). Without diminishing the importance of the political and socio-economic factors that work to exclude women from politics (type of electoral system, feminization of poverty, and so on), the psychological or socio-cultural factor that I spoke of last plays an important role in the empowerment of women and affects their participation in political life. I would like to quote here Rawya Shawa, a Palestinian MP:

It is very difficult for women to talk, to argue, to press for their concerns. How can we encourage women to talk and to express themselves? Maybe the woman in the hut has a lot to say, but we have to encourage her to talk... the answer is education. Education has led many women in my society to join political parties or participate in political activities. Education is the most important channel for encouraging women to speak out. (Shvedova, 1998, p. 27)

Women and Education: The Role of IWSAW and LAU

Indeed, education and training for women's leadership in general, and for orienting women toward political life in particular, are key. Research has established the positive link between women's level of literacy (mainly university education) and the likelihood of them being perceived as

men's equals in social spheres (Shvedova, 1998, p. 29). Equally important, however, is the possibility to present women with "work patterns that are conducive to political leadership" (Shvedova, 1998, p. 27). Women need to have an understanding of the concerns of women, mostly through gendered awareness-raising. They need to develop argumentative and lobbying skills, and they need networking if they are to be empowered or to be trained for political careers. Some researchers talk of "women's leadership schools" where such training can be carried out, and where the skills acquired by those women who "made it" can be passed on to the younger generation who can learn about the experiences of those women and improve their performance. Without such education

and such training, women's lack of confidence in their ability to move and shake things will be perpetuated, and their under-representation in the political sphere reinforced, even though they have the same potential as men. Some researchers refer to this lack of confidence as "the culture of fear." Feminist author Naomi Wolf, for instance, speaks of "fear of power" among young women, a fear that even the best university education may not dispel. To Wolf, twenty-first century women may well be more literate than ever, but they remain "power illiterate." Their self-esteem, at the heart of identity formation, may be boosted by their education, but self-esteem is not just about "feeling confident about oneself" (1993, p. 236). It is about "feeling confident about one's right and ability to change the world" (p. 236).

If that diagnosis is true, if women are afraid of being empowered and of joining political life despite the increasing number of political, educational, and economic possibilities available to them, then what explains this "culture of fear" and this "power illiteracy" amongst even the most educated of women? In order to answer this question, allow me to come full circle and to go back to the concept of "role models" with which I started off. When Wolf asked a group of university students about their reluctance to assume leadership positions, a common justification was their fear of being "shot down," "disliked," or "criticized." They were afraid of being women and failing. When asked if there has ever been a woman "who used real power in a way [they] respected" outside family circles, the answer was a definite no. I quote one of her students:

I went through my history book and there were hardly any women. They are not there. The examples are not there. If you do not show women role models — that women can get in positions of power — then why should you even try? (1993, p. 254)

“The main mission of the women's movement is to inculcate the right type of confidence and belief among women, and to cultivate assertive stances among them” (Shvedova, 1998, p. 38) by having their leadership skills honed. Women should come to realize that power is not a domain exclusive to men, and should learn to overcome the taboo that makes it virtually impossible for them to claim power or achievement, because they are told that power is not feminine. But in order to do that, they need female role models, they need mentoring by women who made it, and who can tell them that they can make it too. During my adolescent years, I often asked myself who my role model in life was. Sadly, I could not think of a single female role model. Only male role models came to my mind. Great scientists, writers, or artists. Even my dad was a role model because, against all odds, he made something out of nothing. But those male role models did not help much. They were all male, I was female, and I could not help thinking that they probably made it precisely because they were male. I was desperately in search of a female role model I could learn from and be like when I grew up.

Fortunately for me, LAU provided me with the unique opportunity of finding those female role models as a young undergraduate. They were not great scientists, or writers, or artists — people I had no chance of encountering in real life anyway. They were better than that. They were real women whom I could see in action, whom I could interact with and directly learn from. Some of them were great teachers who taught me what it meant to be truly professional in the workplace. Others were chairwomen, deans, and vice presidents whose position of power was a constant source of challenge and yet they rose to the challenge and proved themselves in what is still a male-dominated society. To many of these women I am doubly-indebted: first for showing me that it can be done, and later on for entrusting me with doing it. It was a female professor at LAU who requested that I replace her after she fled the country when the civil war became too dangerous for non-Lebanese faculty to stay. It was a female chair who increasingly entrusted me with more courses and responsibilities, gradually building my self confidence and preparing me for an academic career. It was a female dean who recommended me for ever more challenging tasks, last but not least of which was that of directing the Women's Institute at LAU as of October 2005. And I can go on.

What all these women do not know is how much I owe who I am today to them. For years, I watched them in action at LAU, which is, as a university, a microcosm of society. I watched them defending positions, leading discussions, debating issues, making decisions. I watched them asserting themselves in public with authority, fairness, intelligence, and eloquence. They were role models and mentors in the truest sense of the word, though they probably are not even aware of it. I would like my presentation today to be a tribute to them, and to LAU that welcomed them and nurtured them, allowing them to live up to their full potential. My only wish, in closing, is to be able to repay both these women and the institution which was a pioneer in the Arab world when it introduced education for women in 1924 and a pioneer again when it created the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World in 1973. I know I may not be able to repay the debt directly — some of these women are not even around anymore — but maybe the best way for me to repay them and LAU is to pass it on.

Endnotes

1. This information is taken from a current project, “Media for role model creation and identity formation in adolescent athletes”, sponsored by Georgetown University's Children's Digital Media Center. <http://cdmc.georgetown.edu/projects.cfm> Accessed November 22, 2005.
2. Ibid.

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