

Women and Local Governance in Lebanon

Summary of the Lebanese experience and starting points of discussion

There is still a stalemate over the situation of Lebanese women at the level of the general legislative framework, which governs the relationship between women and authorities, institutions and decision-making. Bearing in mind that the abolition of discrimination against women is not a goal in itself as much as it is also a means towards a community built on sustainable development and the balance of gender relations, there is a definite need for determining the reasons for this stalemate.

Despite the significant steps taken by Lebanon in law-making through the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ("The Convention") under Law No. 572 on July 24, 1996, it seems clear that Lebanon has yet to establish mechanisms for stimulating the participation of women in local governance. However, adherence to the convention fell short of achieving increased women's participation due to the structural characteristics of Lebanese society. These characteristics are still experiencing a contradiction between text and practice, between the apparent openness of society, and the fanaticism being committed simultaneously. Despite distancing themselves from decision-making centers, women and their committees managed to make remarkable progress in matters of gender in Lebanon. This progress is most notable at the level of education, while disparities still prevail in terms of employment and wages.

Constitution:

The Lebanese constitution does not include any article that discriminates between men and women. Since its issuance in 1962, the Lebanese Constitution had consecrated the equality of citizens before the law. With respect to the international treaties signed by Lebanon, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women under Law No. 572 dated July 24, 1996, signed nearly 17 years after its creation in 1979, is the most noteworthy. When concluding this convention, Lebanon had expressed clear reservations on some of its clauses. In other ordinances parallel to the "liberal" nature of the Lebanese constitution, in terms of non-discrimination on the basis of sex in political rights, there is a similar "liberal" nature, especially at the level of the election and municipality laws.

Partial Participation:

The report on sustainable human development in Lebanon in 1997 points out that "...on the one hand, despite the progress made in women's education, and their increasing involvement in work on the other, the volume of women's participation and their effectiveness in the public sector are still below their energies and capabilities."

1- At the level of the administration, namely the judiciary, military and diplomatic corps, the rate of women in general administrative positions does not exceed 6.1 per cent. A steady increase in the number of female judges is noted and the rate of female participants in this field has reached more than 20 per cent of the total judges serving.

2- At the level of parliamentary elections: After the parliamentary elections held in May-June 2005, the percentage of women's representation in the Lebanese Parliament is still very low (6 out of 128 deputies). As a result of these elections, three women were appointed, while the three women elected in the parliamentary elections of 2000 kept their seats. The main reasons behind this low rate include the absence of quotas and the non-adoption of the relative ballot system. The current system of election does not allow opportunities for minorities and women as it is not based on a representational basis. However, changes in this system are likely to motivate women to stand as candidates even in the absence of the quota system because it would give "political minorities" a space that would not be provided for by the majority system.

3- At the level of municipal elections: The 2004 local elections saw a decline in women's participation compared to the 1998 general elections, not in the absolute number of elected women but rather in the percentage of women elected. Accordingly, this increase was accompanied by a noticeable rise in the number of new municipalities created.

Obstacles that impede the promotion of women's participation:

Although numerically women constitute half of the society and more than 52 per cent of registered voters, there are three types of constraints that impede the promotion of women's participation in public life. These are:

- Political obstacles, notably national political pressure and the difficulties it creates for political parties and women to participate beyond the 'traditional or kin' system, the absence of appropriate legislation that would ensure a better environment such as the women's quota, the absence of ceiling on election campaign financing which would allow women with limited resources to fairly compete, the fact that men have greater access to service providers and administrators compared to women, and the failure of political parties' to push for a gender policy that guarantees equality between male and female candidates.
- Economic constraints: Financial independence is not enough to enable women to play a parliamentary role which requires relatively huge resources. However, it is absolutely essential for women who want to run for election.
- Social constraints: the low rate of educated women, the family and local traditions which designate that men are more advanced in the area of politics than women, the difficulty for women committees to agree on a list of women candidates to be financially and morally supported by these committees, and challenges in maintaining a work-life balance.

The most important reason for pushing for greater involvement of women at this level rests in the findings of the International Transparency Organization which studied the perceptions of corruption two years ago and revealed that states in which women participate in governance are those that registered the lowest levels of corruption.

In conclusion, the transition from the descriptive area to that of initiative is an issue that women's committees in Lebanon are beginning to consider.

Recommendations

- The adoption, by non-governmental organizations concerned with democracy and human rights, of legislation mandating women's participation in public life so that Lebanon will not continue, as in most of the Arab world, to "breathe with a single lung."
- Ensure the networking and empowerment of these forces to pressure the government, parliament and decision-makers to develop changes in the current legislation and regulations in line with Lebanon's official commitment to international conventions and charters.

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