

Silent No More: Lebanese Women Bearing the Brunt of the Patriarchal System

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To be placed in a universe so free, imagine your every move being overshadowed. This is nothing but the reality that Lebanese women face till this day. A life shaped not by oneself, but by the patriarchal system.

Historical roots of the patriarchy in Lebanon

This is no recent horror; it dates back to the days of tribal and feudal systems where male dominance was central to all aspects of life. It is a well-known fact that Lebanon functions based on a sectarian government, where religion interferes with politics.

The ottoman era sparked several women to recognize that their existence was much more than cooking, cleaning, and caring.

Soon after that, women continued to suffer under the French mandate which promoted a national identity but neglected women's rights. Many women in the mid-twentieth century ran for elections but failed, and the hopes of having women's rights similar to the West were far from being realized.

After Lebanon's independence, several women ran for political roles, but there was no hope. In fact, women got the right to vote in 1952, 32 years after the 19th amendment in the United States, which marked the official recognition of women's suffrage. This clearly shows the slow progress Lebanon experienced over the years. Furthermore, the first woman to enter the Lebanese Parliament was Myrna Bustani in 1963, who was appointed to fill her late father's seat. Unfortunately, she only made it because of her father. But without this accomplishment, who knows how long it would've taken another woman to reach the parliament.

As the World Steps Forward, Lebanon Takes Three Steps Back

This system has resulted in laws that allow women to remain underrepresented compared to men. Indeed, every country progresses at its own pace, but Lebanon is somewhat behind the curve. When it comes to Lebanon's position on the international stage, the numbers speak volumes.

In the 2024 "Global Gender Gap Index" rankings by the World Economic Forum, Lebanon ranked 133rd out of 146 countries. Regarding economic participation and opportunity, Lebanon stood at 122nd place. The most concerning part, addressed in this article, is political empowerment, where Lebanon ranked 142nd out of 146 countries, with a score of only 0.033. These statistics speak for themselves – if no changes occur now, it might take a century to achieve a hint of equality.

Despite the thirty years of commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Lebanon still hasn't embedded main laws in its legislation and has barely made any progress.

Legal Framework and Challenges that Impose Barriers on Women's Political participation

- Electoral Law

No gender quota, leaving numerous women underrepresented, silencing their voices and thoughts.

- Nationality Law

Women cannot pass their nationality to their spouses or children. This affects single mothers who wish for a future for their children and what is best for them.

- Domestic Violence Law

In 2014, Law No. 293 addressing violence against women left a narrow definition that failed to criminalize marital rape, leaving married women to fear abuse without legal protection. Due to the vagueness of the law, marital rape has become a normalized reality in the country.

- Lack of a Child Marriage Law

There is no age restriction in Lebanon, as marriage laws are governed by religious sects. This affects women in ways they may not even realize, impacting their health, education, and social development. So much potential is lost when early marriage occurs without proper awareness and guidance about what they are getting themselves into.

But then again, this all goes back to the intersection of religion and politics. It is sectarianism that reinforces the patriarchal vision that continues to haunt women.

Feminist movements and resistance

Where do we go from here?

In the recent conference “Youth Engagement in Politics: Dialogue with MPs on Women's Political Participation” held by the Asfari institute in collaboration with the UNDP, UN Women, and the Embassy of Canada on the 4th of March, many important issues were brought to light. Two members of parliament, Dr. Halime Haakour and Dr. Najat Aoun Saliba, joined a conversation that rebuilt hope for young women with dreams. They discussed the difficulties women face behind

the scenes. The discrimination, suffering, and scrutiny they struggled with made it ten times harder for them while climbing up the ladder. MP Najat Aoun Saliba showcased a video where she emphasized the importance of certain quotas in every political party to ensure women's participation. This system ultimately opens new doors filled with opportunities for women. Although those might not be completely equal to men, they are the first step to a new Lebanon.

This point made me raise the question as to whether the quota system goes hand in hand with dissolving the patriarchal system, or if the quota system can achieve women's representation on its own.

Her answer was inspiring and took me by surprise. She said that the only way to dissolve the dominant mindset is through your voice. And that could not be any truer; to stand up for yourself and prove yourself with action is enough to show men that they do not always have the upper hand.

One thing that really stuck with me is the brink of hope both members of parliament gave to young women. They mentioned how they hope that their voice in the parliament will ease the difficulties for the younger generations to come. All their pain and suffering did not go to waste, but did in fact open a door for a more prosperous future for every Lebanese woman.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lebanese women still suffer from various forms of inequality, whether it be gender-based violence, underrepresentation in decision-making positions, or limited legal protection. More attention should be given to this issue, not just through words but through concrete actions and meaningful legal reforms.

On the bright side, Lebanon is already in an era of change and hope. All these actions are what bring us here today, but let us not dwell on the past.

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