This brief draws on my personal experience leading two programs—Women’s Economic Empowerment and Women’s Political Empowerment—both of which have worked to address the state of Lebanese women’s social and economic issues since the 1990s.

Prior to my direct involvement in advancing women’s political and economic empowerment, I was engaged in daily meetings with the constituents represented by my husband’s family. It is customary in Lebanon for constituents to seek help from hereditary political families who have held prominent positions in Lebanon for centuries. Constituents would arrive at any time of the day and without prior notice with the expectation that our family—the Arslans—would help address their grievances. My role was to help manage individual complaints and to intercede to seek justice. Unfortunately, there is not always equality before the law in Lebanon. Through this work it became clear to me that legal reform must also be accompanied by public awareness, political empowerment from below, and economic empowerment. I brought this knowledge with me to the realm of women’s rights.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

In 2001, I—as part of a group of both men and women—helped to initiate the Women’s Political Empowerment program. Its goal was to enlist educated women to help bridge the gap of women’s participation in the national decision-making process. At that time, women—even if they were educated and held prominent positions in companies or civil society organizations—hesitated to get directly involved in politics, as it was considered a man’s domain. To break through this patriarchal domination, we organized awareness campaigns—beginning in Beirut and spreading to other areas across the country—that targeted both academic institutions and the general public. We organized conferences, seminars, roundtables, and visits to government officials and political leaders. With the support of enlightened men who also believed that women should play a stronger role in economic and political life, we arranged demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests whenever and wherever needed. One of our central demands was that women should be elected to parliament in numbers that comply with the recommended 30% prescribed at the 1995 Beijing Conference.¹

Second, to achieve legal reform, I collaborated with lawyers who supported women’s rights and other intellectuals. We launched campaigns advocating for gender equality before the law as well as within political parties, where women elected to office were still not given prominent positions.

Third, to achieve public awareness, I collaborated with media outlets and local NGOs to launch awareness campaigns targeting women in both urban and rural areas across the country. The collaborators pinpointed issues and listed them in order of priority; many of these reflected the complaints I had encountered in my daily work.

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Fourth, to enact empowerment from below, we focused on education, believing it is the cornerstone of development and progress. For example, we established the New Generation School—comprising approximately 300 students in primary and intermediary levels—in a rural area to accommodate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were able to attend free of charge, and allowed for mixed gender classrooms, which was a progressive step in a reserved society.

Eventually, we further developed the initiative to promote the involvement of rural women in local governance across the country, focusing on municipal and mayoral elections. Rural women were encouraged to ask questions about candidates that evaluated their personalities, capabilities, and readiness for public service. Such a role in local politics was previously considered solely a man’s domain. By seeking accountability and demonstrating a high level of awareness and civic responsibility, rural women were encouraged to become equal partners in the formation of public opinion. As a next step, we encouraged the women to get involved in national movements, such as popular protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations, to demand gender equality and equal participation. In their daily lives, these women are likely to face, evaluate, and accordingly accept or reject issues related to maintaining peace following the Lebanese civil war, security, and well-being, and they should be active decision-makers in all issues that directly impact their family’s well-being.

The results of the 2018 elections indicated promising developments. First, women more actively participated in both national and local politics, with an unprecedented 111 female candidates running for office, compared to just 12 female candidates in 2009. We also observed a progressive change in attitude toward women’s participation in elections. Further, women’s participation had a dramatic effect on electoral outcomes at large. For the first time in Lebanon, and particularly in rural areas, a remarkable number of independent candidates were elected, moving districts away from the inherited tradition of supporting leaders based on confessional or personal/family ties.

Even with these successes, it was clear early on in this work that women’s political empowerment must also be accompanied by economic empowerment.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

In 1990, I—along with a group of men and women from different religious sects and backgrounds—founded an NGO called “Society of Lebanon the Giver.” This NGO aims to equip women with the necessary tools to become economically independent. For this objective, we created a plan:

- To transform rural women into capable earners, thus changing their status from relying to reliable;
- To fight poverty by including women in the workforce and enhancing productivity; and
- To liberate women by securing their economic independence.
To implement the plan, we established a training school for handicraft production, which any woman can join free of charge, thereby enabling her to acquire a profession and helping her to live with dignity. The training classes include tailoring, hand and machine embroidery, drawing on tissue, hairdressing, make-up sessions, and flower arrangement. Classes are scheduled in the mornings to allow women to be at home when their children return from school. Any woman is able to register for any class, which accommodates 12 to 15 trainees. Six classes are repeated three times a year, and each year we have an average of 200 graduates. However, the number of trainees has markedly decreased in recent years, since the new generation is more educated and technologically savvy. Though trainees are often from the neighboring towns and villages, we also accommodate remote, rural areas through special training programs. To do so, we collaborate with NGOs in remote areas that provide physical locations for the training. The trainers are paid by the Ministry of Social Affairs and graduates have full liberty to choose their work according to the skillsets they have acquired. Some graduates also give free training sessions to women in their milieu.

As noted earlier, training options included a workshop for hand and machine embroidery, where women could practice as often as needed to become skilled artisans. With close supervision and guidance, the graduates were able to produce luxurious handicrafts. The Society of Lebanon the Giver organized dozens of exhibitions across Lebanon showcasing and selling these goods, ensuring the training school’s ability to continue its operations.

Despite these successes, we encountered many challenges. We had to take into consideration the nature of the targeted areas and the prominence of conservative traditions, taking precautions not to offend residents. Such a policy helped us smoothly launch the program, which, over time, became an indirect challenge to existing social norms and patriarchal mentalities. To help in this regard, we launched awareness campaigns surrounding women’s rights. We emphasized through these campaigns that human rights apply to all human beings and that any woman is eligible to enjoy economic opportunities. Another campaign was directed at helping to educate women about their ability to contribute to their household, connecting them to each other, and emphasizing the right to take opportunities for productivity irrespective of their educational background or social status. We also launched a campaign about other daily concerns, mainly focusing on health care and environmental issues.

At the training schools themselves, we also encountered issues relating to expectations between the trainer and trainees. The trainers demanded full attention and persistence to protect their reputations, while trainees were eager to earn money, as most could not afford to leave their homes and learn a new skill without a monetary justification for their time away. Complex transportation issues were a further impediment, since public transportation is lacking in Lebanon. Sometimes, we were able to hire a bus to solve this issue. Another impediment was the inefficient method of announcing the training sessions; often we had to rely on word-of-mouth because the society had a limited budget with little access to modern technology. Despite these challenges, our economic empowerment initiative yielded many positive outcomes, the most important being sustainable development in remote areas. Our efforts help to improve standards of living as well as women’s self-confidence and social status. Their financial earnings lessened the burden on male family members and eased tension in family relations. To this day, although on a smaller scale, the program continues, attracting new trainees and empowering them with skills to promote and develop products according to the markets’ needs.

Personal stories help to illustrate how this process changed lives. One such story is that of Olga, a mother of eight whose family was displaced during the years of the Lebanese civil war and needed shelter. They lived for a decade in one room until we began marketing and selling her artisanal items in our exhibitions. A few

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years later, they were able to buy a three-bedroom apartment, which brought them overwhelming joy. Similarly, Janan lived with her widowed mother and after a series of exhibitions and a loan from the society, she constructed a small house on an inherited property. Janan and her mother were happy to live in their own house, independent of a disrespectful brother and sister-in-law. Another woman, Nawal, repaired her decayed teeth and regained the smile she used to hide. Labibe paid her children’s school tuition and was able to hospitalize her sick father. Nathalie announced on a radio station, “I now have the luxury of choosing my future husband on an equal basis, for now I am productive and can earn my living.” These are just several stories of many.

**WOMEN’S POLITICAL STATUS**

The implementation of the Women’s Political Empowerment program challenged patriarchal forces, which are born in the family, consolidated by social concepts, and sustained by law. To frame our plan of action, we established the Committee for Women’s Political Empowerment. Believing in democracy and equal citizenship and in line with the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), our plan aimed to:

- Fight obstacles and hindrances;
- Negate taboos;
- Overcome impediments; and
- Ensure the longevity of achievements.

Our activities accelerated as we organized many conferences, sit-ins and protests for lobbying, advocating, and demanding a quota of women represented in parliament. We organized awareness campaigns, of which the media was widely supportive. We built the program on the conviction that with less marginalization and more cooperation, men and women together can build a better country on social, economic, and political levels. Those campaigns addressed both men and women; we addressed men to show that women’s political roles neither contradict nor diminish men’s roles, but rather complement them.

We addressed women to be champions of women’s causes and encouraged them to treat their daughters and sons with equality, thus breaking down the psychological barriers women face as a result of traditions. Women also play a vital role on the national scale in reformulating public opinion toward gender balance.

The traditional statement iterated against the political involvement of women in politics was “Why women? Did men perish?” Another, less aggressive statement claimed that “it is not the right time.” The popularity of these two statements gradually diminished. Today, the sociopolitical prominence of women, once an extraordinary phenomenon, is now natural and indispensable. However, Lebanon still falls short of meeting Beijing Conference recommendations that suggest women should be represented at 30% in decision-making positions. Currently, only six of the 128 members of the national parliament are women. Nevertheless, women did reach the 30% threshold in the newly formed cabinet, where six out of 20 ministers appointed were women.

The story of grassroots mobilization presented in this brief shows that it is an indispensable tool for the development and the enhancement of women’s political and economic status, and for women’s ability to achieve a decent quality of life. Importantly, it also shows that women’s political empowerment must be accompanied by economic empowerment. The two goals are naturally associated, irrespective of which comes first. In the experience of our grassroots efforts in Lebanon, the economic empowerment program paved the way for a female sociopolitical partnership, and the women’s political empowerment program cemented it.
ENDNOTES


2. Two key issues included implementing a gender quota in Lebanon’s parliament that complied with the recommendations of the 1995 Beijing Conference and amending national legislation that prohibits Lebanese women from passing their nationality to their children.

3. Full names of the women involved are not used in order to protect their privacy.


ABOUT THE SERIES

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