

The Role of United Nations Agencies in Women's Development in Lebanon¹

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Introduction

Women in Lebanon often suffer from widespread discrimination that seems to inhibit their full participation in society. Discrimination manifests itself, for example, in the lack of full human rights and in scant provisions for educational opportunities. Other instances include under-representation in the political spheres and in decision-making positions, unequal access to health services, as well as subjugation to a patriarchal system of living. Many women feel that they are prohibited from freely expressing their ideas and their wishes, and fear being alienated from the social milieu in which they live. Moreover, even into the twenty first century, incidents of honor crimes still echo in the far outskirts of the country. While Lebanon is witnessing breakthroughs in many social, technological, economic, and other civic spheres, much remains to be done, when it comes to women.

Lebanese women's status leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Where are the civil institutions at a time of dire need? What is the role of the government in its executive, judicial, and legislative branches? What can non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do to ameliorate the situation? How can the United Nations System (UN) interfere to better an existing situation and prevent it from deteriorating? It may be the case that a working combination of all the above agents

needs to be developed and adapted to ameliorate the living conditions of Lebanese women, without forgetting, of course, the valuable role that the Lebanese citizens themselves can and should play. Yet it seems that at this point in time, the UN is best adept to undertake the task at hand.

UN agencies have long posed themselves as the proprietors of international standards that should be maintained across nations. They are involved in so many aspects of civil life that it is difficult to name one area in which they are not engaged. In Lebanon, many UN agencies, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), have been involved in advancing the status of women in several ways. Their initiatives include providing statistics about women and the difficulties they face, and implementing training and awareness-raising campaigns to empower women.

In this light, the central issue of this report deals with the experiences of some UN agencies in advancing the status of Lebanese women in their particular fields of competence. It seeks to determine the scope of activity of these agencies and to ascertain their contribution to the development of the status of Lebanese women. It holds that the contribution of these agencies is both urgently desired and



intensely beneficial. However, their roles are not without fault and there remains many a thing that they can do to enhance their performance in the area of women's development in Lebanon.

The agencies selected for this study operate in the domains of human rights and education. They are the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Their efforts in promoting the human rights and educational opportunities of Lebanese women respectively will be scrutinized seeking to determine the scopes of activity of these two agencies, and to ascertain their contribution to the development of the status of Lebanese women.

To provide a non-biased and practical approach to the topic, a reflection on how the Lebanese official and civil society view the work of these agencies is provided. Accordingly, representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Non-Governmental Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues shared their thoughts on the work of their UN counterparts. They offered some insights on the particularities of the contribution of the UN agencies to the advancement of Lebanese women and facilitated the assessment of this contribution. They also critiqued the UN agencies' system of work and advanced suggestions to overcome the shortcomings of this system in order to ensure better chances for success.

United Nations Development Fund for Women

Human rights are fundamental entitlements that all persons are supposed to enjoy. Yet reality has shown that these rights need to be protected by international covenants and declarations, the crux of which came in 1948 with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite the Declaration, however, males and females remained distinct in this enjoyment, with the latter being at a disadvantage. As a result, further international intervention was needed to ensure that signatory states were in fact applying what they had voted on. This brought on UNIFEM to see to it that women are enjoying their rights equally with men.

In 1994 UNIFEM established its Western Asia Regional Program (UNIFEM-WARO), which plays an integral part in achieving a world free from inequality. Its work is guided by an empowerment framework recognizing that the gender perspective is still not being systematically considered in national planning processes, and that female participation in the decision-making process and in public life remains limited. UNIFEM-WARO's initiatives hence focused on economic empowerment, governance and women's human rights.

The Economic Empowerment Program was instituted with a focus on strengthening institutions for the development of women's enterprises. This consisted of working with national institutions to enhance services directed towards making small and medium business enterprises more responsive to the needs of women employees, as well as to encourage the emergence of women entrepreneurs.

The Governance Program was directed to building the institutional capacity at the national level for gender planning, gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive development activities. It hopes to increase women's participation in the decision-making processes that shape their lives.

The Women's Human Rights Program was aimed at reinforcing the capacity of women's organizations that deal with human rights issues and enhancing women's access to, and use of, international human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It also seeks to ensure the state's and community's accountability in the protection of the human rights of women, as well as supporting NGOs, governments and international organizations interested in the human rights of women.

Of the more important projects undertaken by the Agency, UNIFEM-WARO engaged actively in promoting the CEDAW. This included efforts to integrate a large component of the CEDAW into school curricula and into UNIFEM-WARO sponsored training for human rights advocates. It also consisted of holding awareness raising campaigns and providing training on CEDAW reporting and implementation. To begin with, a comprehensive kit on the CEDAW was translated into Arabic, with a supplement on the application of CEDAW in the Arab region.

As important as the work of UNIFEM-WARO is, some agency characteristics make it difficult to fruitfully cooperate with the Office.

The rigidity of the organization in financial matters undermines the work being done. While projects themselves are allocated considerable amounts of money, the budgetary system is such that it is not transparent leaving no room for freedom of expenditure. "There is mystery when it comes to financial matters,"²² holds Aman Shaarani, president of the Non-Governmental Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues, who sees the Committee as a mere executor.

A second factor is the nature of the programs themselves. The Agency's system is such that it does not leave room for flexibility whereby programs can be

amended as the need arises: “the programs that we receive are drawn up and should be carried out as they are.”⁷³ Likewise, all the projects are UN dictated and do not take into consideration national priorities. In other words, though programs and projects need to be tailored to the country’s needs and priorities, this is rarely the case, as ready-made proposals are delivered.

In this view, UNIFEM-WARO should consider some of these remedies:

- With respect to financial rigidity, more transparency and awareness of the allocated budget, and more financial flexibility is entrusted to implementing agencies.
- With respect to program rigidities, programs should be amended as the need arises allowing the executors to use their discretion.
- Establishing a tripartite cooperation and coordination between the Agency, the government agencies and the NGOs to draw a clearer, more practical and political free framework for advancing women’s issues.

United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization

Education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy and sustainable development enabling a person to be involved in the community and to contribute to its development. Education should no longer be considered a privilege, but rather a national priority. This message was sent to all nations after the adoption of the Convention Against Discrimination in Education in 1960, the CEDAW in 1979, and the World Conference on Education for All in 1990. As such the role of the UNESCO has become more vital than ever before.

Among other activities, UNESCO participates in evaluating operational projects, monitoring the development of education, promoting literacy and adult education, and establishing programs to enhance educational opportunities for females.

In addition, it has been one of the most active promoters of the CEDAW. The implementation of the Convention is a major commitment of the UNESCO, which intervenes to ensure women’s equality with men in the field of education, including physical education and sports. In addition, through the ‘Passport to Equality’, a personalized presentation of the CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, UNESCO led an international campaign to promote the right of women to education as well as to raise awareness to the existence and importance of the CEDAW. It is published in ten languages, including Arabic, Hindi and Chinese, and is distributed worldwide for free.

In Lebanon, the UNESCO-Regional Office cooperates with the Ministry of Education to establish programs in

accordance with Ministry-set priorities. Currently the Office is engaged in the Basic Education Project, conducted in partnership with the National Center for Research and Development (NCERD), a subdivision of the Ministry.

The aim of this project is to provide continuous support to the ongoing national educational reform process, to strengthen the public education sector, and give it back its credibility. It also seeks to evaluate the new textbooks, screen the curriculum for gender stereotypes, and ensure international standards of educational information. Furthermore, it trains teachers and Ministry and NCERD staff to be gender-sensitive and to overcome gender stereotypes.

Though of great value to the community, the efforts of the UNESCO Regional Office do leave room for speculation. For one, the Regional Office does not hold any partnership with private schools. While it can be argued that the private sector is not in as much need as the public one for assistance, such an argument does not hold true. The inadequacies, especially those related to gender issues and that abound in the public educational sector, are the same as those in the private sector.

In the same light, the Office does not interact with institutions of higher education, whether private or public. While it does advocate the importance of higher education, it does not interfere to ensure equal access to it. Neither does it interfere to make institutions of higher education gender balanced and gender neutral.

The limitations of the Office’s mandate, which establishes its relationship with the official sector of the community, thus imposes shortcomings on the work being done. Incorporating a “broader and more inclusive spectrum of the country”⁷⁴ would not only provide the society with benefits, but would also enable the Regional Office to augment its own knowledge of the problems of the Lebanese educational system and to enhance its activities.

In this light, initiatives to further enhance the intervention of the Office should include efforts to:

- Improve the literacy and general education level of women, particularly rural women, through the initiation of illiteracy-fighting campaigns,
- Reduce the drop-out rate of women, particularly those from lower-income levels, through the provision of incentives,
- Improve women’s access to vocational training and continuing education, by facilitating their admission to vocational institutions, as well as to institutions of higher education,
- Develop the quality of the educational system whereby it disseminates gender-sensitive information and

ensures the adoption of gender-sensitive curricula,
- Introduce mass communication programs that aim to change the attitudes of both sexes towards women,
- Act to ensure that the government establishes adequate measures to enforce compulsory and free education.

Conclusion

This study has examined the particularities of the two UN agencies to advance the status of Lebanese women. It has reflected on some of their initiatives and portrayed their shortcomings. It has shown that there are still some gaps in both the operational and program dimensions of their interventions. As the agencies strive to address gender disparities within the national context, it is crucial for them to assess and understand their role in both cultivating and challenging gender inequalities, and adapting their programs to the specific needs of the country. A few key ideas are shared below to render this possible:

- Expand the strategic partnership network. Recognize the importance of identifying and cooperating with an expanded range of strategic allies, both traditional and non-traditional, to plan and implement more effective programs for the advancement of women and gender equality.
- Address gaps in gender-sensitive quantitative and qualitative data. Ensure the collection of gender desegregated quantitative data to document gender disparities.
- Concentrate support to strengthen the national women machinery with the necessary human and

financial resources. Include the exploration of innovative schemes so that gender mainstreaming is integrated into all national policies, programs and projects.

While reflecting on this work, it should be kept in mind that the contest against the prevailing discrimination of Lebanese women is ongoing. This contest is not a matter that can be isolated and examined under controlled circumstances; it is rather a dynamic process with new achievements taking place in a constant manner. Consequently, this study does not present a static picture of the work being done. More exactly, it represents a segment of the actual reality and marks a starting point for further investigation into the matter.

End Notes

1. A thesis submitted for the attainment of the degree of Master of Arts to the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut, May 2001.
2. Aman Shaarani, interview by Rania Al-Abiad, tape recording, Non-Governmental Committee for the Follow-Up of Women's Issues, Beirut, 16 January 2001.
3. Ibid.
4. Mona Mourad, interview by Rania Al-Abiad, tape recording, Lebanese Women Council, Beirut, 3 February 2001.

Forthcoming

Arab Women and Sexuality