

Gender Quotas and Parliamentary Representation

Marguerite El-Helou

Any reader of my first published research on the political participation of Lebanese women can easily detect my vehement opposition to the principle of gender quota and its implementation in Lebanon. As a newcomer to research on women's political empowerment, I lacked in-depth knowledge of the intricacies of the obstacles that faced, and continue to face, Lebanese women who have political aspirations.

Having no personal political ambitions, and facing no obstacles of a discriminatory nature to self achievement and advancement at the professional level, it was hard for me to grasp the logic behind the demands for a women's quota. Simply put, to me, such a proposal was inherently undemocratic, an insult to women, and an underestimation of their ability to make it to power positions based on their competence.

It was only when I ventured into the field of gender and politics to conduct long in-depth personal interviews with female candidates that I became convinced of the need to revise my position. My sample included female candidates that ran in the successive national and municipal elections held in Lebanon since 1996 as well as some of the female candidates who ran since 1953. This conviction grew in intensity upon analyzing the results of some national polls on Lebanese political attitudes and electoral behavior conducted during the last decade. Though the goals of democracy, equality, empowerment, true representation etc... are universal, their definition and the national plans for achieving them must not be separated from the social, cultural, and political contexts within which they are to be implemented and to which they are highly bound. My earlier belief in competence, strong will, and persistence as the only building blocks of the road to achievement of one's goals and rights was shaken. The women quota appeared to be a badly needed temporary measure to break down the social, cultural, and political barriers to actual gender equality in basic, constitutionally protected citizenship rights.

Having stood at both extremes of the continuum of positions on gender quota, I came to recognize the need to disseminate knowledge on, and to raise public awareness of this mechanism as a first step towards promoting equality, a true representative government, and empowerment of women as a developmental goal. Coupled with this came the realization of the need to promote and encourage intellectual and political debate, the sharing of experiences and of lessons learnt, not only in Lebanon but in the Arab world at large. This is why I felt honored and enthusiastic when asked by IWSAW to guest edit this double issue of *Al-Raida* devoted to the issue of gender quotas.

Considering the debate and controversy over gender quota and its effectiveness, we hoped to receive research articles from various parts of the Arab world and to have as wide a regional coverage of and comparison among various experiences and opinions as the size of this issue permits. While this hope did not fully materialize, the quality of the papers we received made



Newspapers, Beirut 2007. (c) Rania Matar. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Janine Rubeiz.

up for this shortcoming by the questions they raise, the insights they contribute, and the objective assessments they provide.

In her study titled “Gender Quotas In Parliament: A Global View”, Mona Lena Krook provides a theoretical, highly informative discussion and assessment of the various types of gender quota, their respective effectiveness and the major factors behind politicians’ decision to adopt this measure. She argues that, due to a variety of intervening factors, women quotas can be a double-edged sword. They may lead to a host of expected and/or unexpected positive implications, as they may end up defeating the goals they were intended to serve.

Valentine Moghadam’s article “Women, Politics, and Gender Quotas” investigates the use of the quota in the Arab world from a conceptual and comparative perspective in an attempt at providing answers to two often voiced questions/assumptions in Arab intellectual circles: Is the democracy deficit in the region a result of women’s absence from power? and, conversely, will more female involvement in politics through quotas lead to more democratization and a rights-based development in the region?

A similar question is raised by Drude Dahlerup in her study entitled “Women in Arab Parliaments: Can Gender Quota Contribute to Democratization?”. In addition to offering a number of significant insights about the adoption and implementation of the quota system, the author suggests that one of the democratic potentials of the new global gender quota trend is that it may open up the “secret garden of nominations” and thus make it more transparent.

The article by Azza Charara Beydoun on “Women in Power and Decision-making Positions: Conditions and Restraints” presents a brief and condensed account of the factors behind denying Lebanese women access to public office, even when the position requires broad knowledge and experience in women’s issues. Using the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) as an example, and upon investigating the nomination mechanism for appointing members of the NCLW, Beydoun tries to show how the traditional, mostly sectarian, familial, and regional factors are given precedence over competence in such appointments.

Official proposals to introduce the women quota in Lebanon are approached from three different perspectives. Drawing on the French and Belgian experiences as well as the work of the Lebanese Constitutional Council, Mark El-Makari’s article entitled “The Proposed Gender Quota in Lebanon: Legal Crisis or Democratic Transformation?” focuses on the constitutionality of adopting the women quota in Lebanon and presents an account of the objections that the quota may encounter at the theoretical, constitutional, and practical levels. The second article by Marguerite El-Helou entitled “Women Quota in Lebanon: A False Promise” provides an assessment of the contribution that the two different types of quota proposed for Parliament and the municipal councils respectively may make towards promoting more women representation in Lebanese politics if adopted. It also draws attention to the factors that have delayed the listing of the gender quota on the agenda of decision-makers.

As a response to those who argue that a gender quota is not feasible within an already implemented sectarian and regional quota in Lebanon, Kamal Feghali prepared a detailed proposal supported with statistics showing how a women quota can be added to the existing sectarian and regional quotas in Lebanon. His article is a summary of this project which we couldn’t publish in full due to space limitations.

The last three articles are case studies of gender quota implementation in Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan. They all emphasize the impact of the type of the existing political system in determining the effectiveness of gender quotas in promoting the political empowerment of women.

Studying the Tunisian case, Kristine Goulding’s article “Unjustifiable Means to Unjustifiable Ends: Delegitimizing Parliamentary Gender Quotas in Tunisia” is very critical of the negative implications of state-sanctioned feminism and gender quota in corporatist political systems on the feminist agenda and the quality of female representation. She argues that, in such systems, women collude in their own gender subordination, become tools of the masculinized state, strike a “patriarchal bargain” and reproduce the same patterns of power and entitlement without promoting change.

Similar patterns appear in the clientelist political system of Morocco as indicated in the study entitled “Gender Quotas in Clientelist Systems: The Case of Morocco’s National List” by James Liddell. The author asserts that the limited space available for maneuvering in such systems ultimately hinders any increase in women’s decision-making abilities on the national level. The author concludes that the gender quota in Morocco did not prove to be an effective means for introducing change either in the patriarchal culture or in women decision-making abilities.

Niemat Kuku, in her article entitled “The Quota System in Sudan: Parties’ Perception of the Way to Enhance Female Political Participation”, discusses the political participation

of Sudanese women and sheds light on their role in the power sharing protocol. Kuku highlights the 2005 interim constitution and discusses women's rights as stipulated within that constitution. The article also discusses the proposals submitted by the various Sudanese political parties for the adoption of a quota system.

The studies included in this issue, with their different assessments of the quota experience in the countries studied, provide a sample of the different views, positions, and assessments found in published works on this issue. Although one cannot deny the role of the type of political system and the power relations within it in determining the nature and extent of the political empowerment of women, few observations are worth making. Implicit in most of those studies is an accusation of women who assume public office through quotas of failing to shape and pursue a feminist agenda among other things. This raises the question as to whether we are having higher expectations of women than they possibly can or want to fulfill, as they, just like men, are guarding the interests and survival of the regimes that brought them to power. Why are our expectations of women always higher than those of men? Why do we always tend to judge such women outside the social, political, and cultural context of which they are part? Finally, do women really form one united bloc with the same ideologies, priorities, aspirations, and agendas? I believe a more realistic and egalitarian approach to assessing women's performance at the political level is called for to practice the equality we preach.

Marguerite El-Helou is Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese University, Lebanon.
Email: guittahelou@yahoo.com