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**The Lebanese national women machinery  
Where does it stand?**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The title of the expert group meeting organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women is “the role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: achievements, gaps and challenges.”

In this paper I will be following the outline suggested in the meeting’s title, namely the achievements, gaps and challenges facing the Lebanese women’s machinery in the light of the three strategic objectives set by the Beijing Platform for Action, under the H section related to the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women. But before doing so, I would like to present a brief historical survey of the Lebanese National Women’s Machinery.

### **Historical Survey of the Lebanese National Women’s Machinery**

When most member states of the United Nations adopted during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976 – 1985) some form of government machinery to advance the status of women, Lebanon was in the midst of a civil strife which lasted for sixteen years and shattered its social and economic fabric. In fact, when the Nairobi Conference convened in 1985, Lebanon had been in a state of war for ten years. As a result, the Lebanese Government did not officially attend the Conference and the Lebanese presence was limited to the participation of NGOs in the Forum.

The Beijing Fourth World Conference on women was an important milestone in the process of setting a Lebanese institutional machinery which would address women’s issues and formulate an adequate strategy for their empowerment.

In 1994, two committees were created in Lebanon to prepare for the Beijing Conference, one at the national level and the other at the NGO level. The National Committee, which was formed by a Council of Ministers’ decree, included seven members of the NGO Committee. Thus the National Report for the Beijing Conference had both an official and an NGO dimension and was the outcome of concerted efforts between both committees.

After the Beijing Conference, and in line with its recommendations, the Council of Ministers approved, in 1996, the formation of a national committee for women affairs – “the National Committee for Lebanese Women (NCLW)” – under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister’s Office, with special funds allotted to it in the budget of that office.

Its members were personalities active in the feminist field as well as academicians and professional women who put their expertise – free of charge – at the disposal of the NCLW, enhancing thus its mission.

The roles to be performed by the NCLW were set as follows:

- a consulting one to the Office of the Prime Minister and the various official institutions dealing with women’s issues;
- a coordinating and liaison one with the various official bodies and institutions, the local NGOs as well as the Arab and international organizations;
- an executive one entailing essentially:
  - the preparation of a national strategy;

- the formulation of plans of action related to women's issues in cooperation with whoever it deemed it necessary, be it a governmental agency or a non-governmental one;
- the undertaking of studies and research projects related to women's affairs.

At the NGO level, the NGO committee was restructured and both bodies agreed to cooperate with each other and with all other institutions concerned with women's issues. However, the cooperation between the two bodies, which constituted at the time the Lebanese National Machinery, was not always easy to achieve, primarily because the roles and responsibilities of each one of them were not clearly defined. The institutionalization of both the National Commission and the NGO Committee was therefore a must to "secure their long-term reliability and sustainability as mechanisms for the coordination and promotion of women in Lebanon at all levels" (Program Document for Lebanese Women's Advancement, 1997, p.27).

UNIFEM – through its project entitled "Post-Beijing Follow-up Operation in Western Asia" – assisted both the NCLW and the NGO Committee in determining their needs and priorities for building their institutional capacity. Each committee prepared its own project work plan and an estimated budget to implement it.

Using their individual workplans, the NCLW and the NGO Committee drew a unified program called **the Lebanese Women's National Strategy**. Its implementation was to be carried by both the NCLW and the NGO Committee "through complementary activities aimed at achieving common goals" (The Lebanese Women's National Strategy, p.4).

The formulation of the strategy rested essentially on the following three assumptions:

- the important role to be played by the NCLW, the formation of which represented a positive step towards the empowerment of Lebanese women;
- the respect of the NGOs' freedom of action, freedom which is characteristic of the Lebanese democratic regime and traditions;
- the coordination between official and civil initiatives in promoting women's rights.

In addition, it aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- To reach full equality between men and women in all the civil legislation which covers social relations at all levels and in different fields.
- To guarantee women's rights as human rights in the light of the International Convention for Human Rights and the Lebanese Constitution.
- To ensure the access of women to reliable, secure and sustainable levels of livelihood.
- To empower women by developing and strengthening their abilities and skills, thus enabling them to benefit from available equal opportunities.
- To increase steadily the share of women's participation in the power structure and decision-making bodies at different levels and in various areas.
- To incorporate the equality between men and women in the social culture and behavioral trends in all areas.

Once the basic objectives were set, the NCLW prepared a two-year workplan where special emphasis was put on strengthening the institutional capacity of the Committee and establishing a reliable data base which would make it possible to formulate adequate policies

related to women's issues. Actually the NCLW published four volumes – two analytical ones and two statistical ones – tracing the evolution of the Lebanese woman over the period 1970 – 1977. The project was financed by the Lebanese government but the data collected was not, however, gender disaggregated, simply because of its unavailability.

In its turn, the NGO Committee prepared a five-year plan of action. All the projects included in both plans of action were grouped together and included in “the Programme Document for Lebanese Women's Advancement” which was presented to potential donors. There was, however, “a lack of integrated and coordinated gender sensitive programming and policy to enable the two women bodies and the donor community to maximize resources and complement each other's activities at all levels” (Programme Document for Lebanese Women's Advancement, p.26).

Although both committees insisted on the importance of the institutionalization process, this process did not actually materialize at the time.

Efforts, though, were undertaken to strengthen the Lebanese National Women Machinery. With the help of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a project aimed at promoting and monitoring gender mainstreaming was undertaken to “promote and monitor gender mainstreaming”. Under the training component of the project, priority was given to:

- a training course for gender focal points (GFPs) in selected ministries and NGOs, as well as other governmental institutions;
- a follow-up workshop for GFPs;
- a source mobilization for key persons in selected ministries, NGOs and NCLW, as well as other governmental institutions.

The end of the year 1998 was a turning point in the history of the NCLW. A legislative law (No. 720) was promulgated in November 1998, altering its name from a “committee” to a “commission” and defining specifically its mandate in terms of:

- consultative tasks and this essentially through expressing views, and submitting plans of action to the head of the government and other public institutions on the status of Lebanese women and ways of achieving gender equality;
- coordination tasks with government institutions and NGOs at the local level as well as regional and international bodies;
- implementation tasks essentially through the formulation and monitoring of various plans of action, carrying out and supporting research, organizing events (workshops, seminars, exhibitions, ...) related to women's issues;

It is worth noting that this mandate does not differ much from that of the 1996 government decree, which had led to the creation of the NCLW.

As for the structure of the NCLW, it consists of:

- a general assembly (18 to 24 members) to be appointed by a cabinet decree and this for a renewable period of three years;
- women parliamentarians and cabinet members in an advisory capacity;

- an Executive Bureau of 8 members elected by the general assembly and the term of which expires with that of the assembly;
- a secretariat which assists the executive bureau and is managed by the secretary general;
- specialized committees set up at the discretion of the NCLW and composed of members of the general assembly.

If one is to look for a broader umbrella of the NCLW's structure, it might make sense to include also under it the gender focal points which operate in the various ministries and public institutions (Traboulsi, 2001). Such an inclusion would enable us to assess with greater accuracy the extent to which gender mainstreaming has actually permeated into the public sector.

Under its new mandate, the NCLW has carried out several projects and activities. Among the most important ones one could mention gender mainstreaming programs, legal counseling aimed at increasing women's awareness about their rights, along with establishing a data base center, located on the premises of the NCLW.

### **The NCLW and the Beijing Platform for Action (Strategic Objective H)**

With this background information about the Lebanese National Women Machinery, it is important to assess the extent to which this Machinery has been successful in implementing the goals set by the Beijing Platform for Action under Strategic Objective H.

If one were to sum up the main achievements of the NCLW since its inception in 1996, one should basically mention:

- The elaboration of a joint National Women Strategy by the NCLW and the NGO Committee. This step, initiated by the first committee of NCLW, has "constituted a land-mark in the long process of women advancement and gender equality in Lebanon (Traboulsi, p.16). The Strategy is in nine thematic areas (legal, political, economic, social, education, health, environment, media and women under Israeli occupation) and stresses on Lebanon's commitment to international conventions related to women.
- The creation of gender focal points within public institutions, through training and capacity building activities. In fact, gender focal points have been established in 14 ministries and government institutions since 1998, before the institutionalization of the NCLW.
- The institutionalization of the NCLW, through which a formal recognition of its goals and mission was secured.

However, one cannot but wonder whether the three above-mentioned points could be really referred to as achievements before introducing some amendments to them.

#### **At the national women strategy level**

The implementation of the proposed strategy is quite difficult to achieve, given its comprehensive nature. A plan of action ought to be drawn from it, with specific projects to be achieved within a well-defined time frame. Mechanisms for assessing the impact of these projects ought also to be developed if this strategy is to be operational.

### At the focal points level

The establishment of focal points in the various ministries and public institutions did not prove to be a successful endeavor. In a recent study (El-Khoury, 2004) based on interviews with various focal point representatives, the experience turned out to be, for most of them, an “outright failure”, basically because of:

- the indifference shown by their colleagues (both men and women). For most of them, the whole gender issue is not very important, there are many more issues that have to be addressed before tackling it;
- the prevailing stereotyped image of women whose primary role is still considered to be that of a homemaker, while the husband is the provider;
- the lack of communication between the various focal points;
- the lack of communication with the NCLW which they feel did not ensure the sustainability of the project and did not provide them with adequate guidance and support;
- the unavailability of funds in the ministries and public institutions’ budgets;
- the paucity of women in top key administrative positions;
- the rise of fundamentalism.

### At the Institutionalization Level

There are many loopholes in the new institutionalization of the NCLW; and this according to many consultants and NCLW members as well. According to one of the members; NCLW is facing difficulties in achieving its targets basically because of:

- the composition of the general assembly. Although its members are prominent and educated women, most of them are not really involved in the Lebanese women’s movement and are not concerned by the feminist discourse;
- the hierarchical structure of the NCLW: All decisions have to be approved by the President of the Commission, who is in turn appointed by the President of the Republic;
- the lack of communication between the NGOs of the Lebanese women’s movement and the NCLW;
- the absence of any impact of the NCLW in the public space;
- most of the NCLW activities do not differ from those carried out by any other NGO dealing with women’s issues;
- the absence of a specific budget allotted directly to the NCLW. The money allotted to it is part and parcel of the budget of the Council of Ministers.

In addition, according to many stakeholders; there are also other issues of concern:

- The wide range of options given to the NCLW, by Law 720, to operate from. Consequently, it is facing difficulties coping with all of them which range from an advisory role to policy formulation, to research, to project implementation ...
- The irregularities of the NCLW meetings. Although the internal law of the NCLW requires the convening of at least one monthly meeting of the Executive Bureau, the latter did not meet for seven months in a row between March and October 2000.

## **Recommendations**

If this situation is to be changed, what could be the possible recommendations to be implemented?

### At the NCLW level\*

- A clearer and more concise mandate for the NCLW.
- More explicit criteria and processes for the selection of the NCLW members.
- A redistribution of the powers and responsibilities at the level of the Executive Board and a reexamination of its relations with the Secretariat.
- A more action and output oriented approach.
- A close and more significant cooperation between the NCLW and the focal points.

### At the Country's level

Assuming that all the recommendations suggested above are adopted and that the NCLW becomes very effective as far as women's issues are concerned, empowering Lebanese women will not take place unless:

- there is an increasing awareness about the important and productive role that women could achieve. This awareness ought to be worked at equally for men and women. To do so, there is an urgent need to dismantle the traditional image of the woman as being solely a homemaker and that of the man as being the sole provider;
- there is a concerted effort among Lebanese women to bring up their children – boys and girls – using exactly the same approach and on an equal footing;
- there are serious attempts at improving the image given by the media about women;
- there is, at the legislative level, a consensus at amending all discriminatory laws against women.

The fulfillment of all these goals will obviously result in promoting women's advancement in Lebanon and will, hopefully, have spillover effects in the rest of the Arab world.

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\* This section draws on Traboulsi's Consultant Report

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