

*Legal Literacy
on Political
Rights and
Labor Laws
Among
Lebanese
Women*

The recent information research available on women in Lebanon indicate some significant improvement in their status. Thus, female illiteracy rates among women above the age of 10 years went down from 43.3% in 1970 to 17.8% in 1996. Sixty percent of students enrolled in universities are women, which indicates that the number of women qualified for occupying higher positions is on the rise. Also, the participation of women in the labor force is reported at 20,7% today, a rate higher than previous levels.

Yet, there are persisting gender disparities along certain lines. The first is the limited presence of women at the highest levels of management in the public sector. The second is women's representation in the executive body of the Government, notably the cabinet. While the number of ministers is 30, none is a female. The third is women's presence in the legislative branch, i.e. the Parliament. Of the total 128 parliamentary members, only three are women. The fourth is women's participation in political parties. Only 4.7% of Lebanese women are active members of political parties. The fifth is participation in local governance and community development. In the municipalities of Lebanon, only three out of 390 representatives are women. On the municipal board, only 15 out of 1400 members were women in 1985.

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Many reasons could be cited to account for this low level of involvement of women in the political/public sphere. The first is the continuing dichotomy between the public and the private sector, thus qualifying women mostly to the realm of the household. The second is the character of Lebanese politics which is relatively a violent atmosphere, marked by civil war, rounds of violence and exchange of accusation often in an aggressive manner. The third is the fact that political parties present in Lebanon have not had in general, on their agenda any interest in women's issues. The fourth, and the most important, is the level of awareness and knowledge among women about their rights as members of society, including political rights. Participation of women in the public sphere requires a certain degree of awareness about rights and obligations, Knowledge is a source of power and status.

The present article summarizes the results of a national study conducted in 1997 by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) office in Beirut to assess the level of legal literacy among women, in particular knowledge of some basic political rights and laws related to labor. Results of the study indicate the low level of legal awareness among Lebanese women, and hence the need for launching programmes for legal empowerment of women.

Objectives of the survey

The main objectives of the survey are to:

- 1 - Assess the level of knowledge among Lebanese women about their political rights.
- 2 - Assess the level of knowledge among Lebanese women about labor laws.
- 3 - Assess the need for establishing a project for legal empowerment of women.

Methodology

The study on the legal literacy level of Lebanese women was done as part of a national survey conducted to assess the health status of children aged under five years of age. The survey was done by interviewing mothers about the health of their children and their knowledge about

other issues. Hence the study has included married women only.

The survey has included one sample comprising 30 clusters, each containing mothers of at least 35 children under five years of age. The sample was selected from the list of cities and villages that constitutes the sampling frame of the study, which is available on computer at UNICEF. The study represents Lebanon as a whole, i.e. the findings can be reported only at national level, and do not refer to specific Lebanese regions. Within each of the clusters, the families were randomly selected according to standard methods adopted by UNICEF.

The survey instrument consisted of a questionnaire including information about the mother (age, educational level, occupation) and questions related to knowledge about political rights and labor laws.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out some gaps in the present survey that may affect slightly the results obtained. First the survey has included only mothers, i.e. married women, and not both single and married women. Second is the fact that there are regional disparities in the level of awareness of women that are obviously not reflected in the proportion of respondents without answers is quite significant. Forth, some of the issues covered by the survey require a qualitative analysis, and not merely a closed ended questionnaire.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

The sample included 873 women. More than half of the women interviewed had intermediate or secondary education, 9.7% were illiterate and about 17% had university education.

**Table - 1 -
Distribution of sample by educational attainment of women**

Educational level	Proportion
Illiterate	9.7%
Primary	17.3%
Intermediate	30.9%
Secondary	21.7%

Vocational	3.5%
University	15.2%
High Technical	1.5%

Eighty two percent of the respondents were housewives, and the remaining 18% are employed.

**Table - 2 -
Distribution of sample by Occupation of women**

Type of occupation	Proportion
Agriculture	3.7%
Teacher	4.4%
Independent profession	3.6%
Housewife	82.8%
Employee	4.9%
Others	0.6%

Level of awareness on political rights

When asked about the age at which an individual is eligible for voting in parliamentary elections, only 19.2% of the respondents had the right answer, i.e. 18 years of age, while 38.3% of them said 21 years.

Almost 69% of women do not think that there is a difference between men and women in terms of the age at which they eligible for voting, while 10% think there is a difference. Twenty one percent did not have an answer to this question.

The right of women to run for elections was recognized by the majority of women, as evidenced by the following table.

**Table - 3 -
Women's eligibility to run for parliamentary elections**

Answer	Proportion
No answer	10.5%
Yes	79.8%
No	5.4%
Do not know	4.3%

When asked about who elects the President of the Republic, only 59% of women interviewed had the correct answer.

**Table - 4 -
Election of the President of the Republic**

Answer	Proportion
No answer	11%
Members of parliament	58.5%
Citizens	18.8%
Do not know	11.7%

Level of awareness about labor laws

With respect to awareness about labor laws, almost half of the women interviewed had a correct answer, while 40% had no answer and 10% had a wrong answer.

About the difference in entitlement to annual leave between men and women, the level of awareness is relatively low as evidenced by the following table.

Table - 5 -

Difference in entitlement to annual leave between men and women

Answer	Proportion
No answer	10.8%
Yes	13.5%
No	56.1%
Do not know	19.6%

Only forty percent of women had a correct answer regarding entitlement to maternity leave; thirty percent had a wrong answer and 30% did not have an answer.

Factors affecting the level of legal awareness among women

The level of education of women seems to be a significant variable affecting their level of awareness regarding the two issues included in the survey. The difference is particularly noted between illiterate women and those that are educated. Indeed, even a level of primary education makes a difference in the results obtained. For example, about 59% of illiterate women answered that a woman can run for parliamentary elections, while this proportion is about 84% among women with intermediate and university education.

Table - 6 -

Eligibility of women to run for elections according to educational level of respondents

Answer	Illiterate	Primary	Intermediate	Secondary	Vocational	University	High technical
No answer	12.5%	7%	8.7%	11.8%	13.8%	12%	16.7%
Yes	58.8%	80.3%	83.5%	81.5%	79.3%	83.2%	83.3%
No	12.5%	7%	5.1%	3.4%	3.4%	4%	-
Do not know	16.3%	5.6%	2.8%	3.4%	3.4%	0.8%	-

It is worth noting in the above table the high proportion of the answer

«do not know» among illiterate women.

The significant relationship between educational level of women and their knowledge about who elects the President of the Republic is demonstrated by the fact that 29% of the illiterate women did not know the answer to this question, compared to 12% among those with primary education and 3% among those with university education.

**Table - 7 -
Who elects the President of the Republic according
to educational level of respondents.**

Answer	Illiterate	Primary	Intermediate	Secondary	Vocational	University	High technical
No answer	11.3%	7.7%	9.8%	11.8%	13.8%	12.8%	16.7%
Members of Parliament	37.5%	57%	56.3%	60.7%	58.6%	76%	75%
Citizens	22.5%	23.2%	23.6%	15.2%	27.6%	8%	8.3%
Do not know	28.8%	12%	10.2%	12.4%	-	3.2%	-

As for the impact of women's work on their level of legal awareness, the following results were found.

**Table - 8 -
Who elects the President of the Republic According to Work of Women**

	No answer	Members of Parliament	Citizens	Does not know
Working Women	16%	64.3%	10.5%	9%
Non-working Women	9.8%	57.6%	20.9%	11.7%

The above table reveals a significant relationship between work of women and knowledge about who elects the President of the Republic. Indeed, non-working women are less knowledgeable than those who work.

On the other hand, no significant impact of women's work is noted with respect to the question on the difference between women and men in the age for voting eligibility.

When it comes to women's eligibility to run for elections, there is no

significant relationship between a women's works and her answer, but there is a trend in favor of working women.

Table - 9 -
Women's eligibility for running for elections
According to work of women

	No answer	Yes	No	Do not know
Working Women	16%	76.9%	4.2%	2.8%
Non-working Women	9.2%	80.2%	5.8%	4.7%

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study indicate the low level of awareness among Lebanese women on political rights and labor laws. Within the specific context of Lebanon, this is a finding at once unusual and expected. The relatively high number of educated women (compared to other countries of the Middle east region), their involvement in work outside the household, the highly politicized character of Lebanese society, the large number of women NGOs and the relatively open character of the Lebanese community, all these factors contradict the findings of the present study. Yet, it is worth noting that Lebanon is a country in transition, and as such some of the results obtained are expected on the following grounds. The Lebanese social system is still strongly influenced by traditional values and ideals that emphasize women's subordination. Indeed, it is only 45 years ago that Lebanese women obtained the right to vote and run for elections, The majority of NGOs have been preoccupied with relief and social welfare operations during the years of civil strife, and hence did not address issues related to long-term development. Following the end of the war, activities of women NGOs have focused on introducing modifications on the body of legislature and providing beneficiaries with income-generating skills, thus focusing on increasing women's participation in the labor force and their economic independence.

Given these results, it becomes essential to develop strategies and plans of action to raise the level of legal literacy among Lebanese women and increase their level of awareness about various kinds of rights. The

following are broad guidelines for reaching these objectives:

1 - Instill a culture of human rights, through integration of this subject into the education curricula, both at school and university levels. This is an essential part of socialization of all members of society.

2 - Integrate within the various professional associations and syndicates training programmes on civil rights in all their aspects. This includes primarily political rights, labor laws and personal statute laws.

3 - Launch legal literacy programmes within the activities of NGOs in general and women NGOs in particular. This is an innovative strategy that will serve to empower women and develop their abilities to benefit from available equal opportunities.

4 - Work towards the publication of reference books and various forms of communication material on the rights of citizens and women in particular in the various sectors of everyday life. These reference books have to be presented in a simple form accessible to women of different education levels. They should include case studies to illustrate and document the principles they present.

5 - Work towards the establishment of legal counseling offices. They should be spread in all Lebanese regions, in places that are accessible to serve the widest group of beneficiaries. Close coordination could be made with the Bar Association and women volunteer groups to ensure the presence of resource persons within these centers.

6 - Organize awareness sessions campaign for women: this includes training of trainers from all regions of the country and organization of education sessions for women often in the form of discussion of specific case studies taken from the real world.

These are only few activities that could be done to empower Lebanese women by increasing their level of legal literacy; they are necessary in order, for once, to give women some rights, rather than just asking them for more obligations and focusing on their income-generating capacities.