

Society

Interview

Lebanon seeking to turn public sector citizen friendly

Samar Kadi

Beirut

Promoting a citizen-oriented public administration through digital transformation aimed at combating corruption and fostering accountability and transparency is the challenging task of Lebanon's Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR).

The mission might seem impossible in a country plagued by decades of a dysfunctional and corrupt public sector. However, Inaya Ezzeddine, minister of state for administrative development, insisted that where there is a will, there is always a way.

"There is a major problem of mistrust between the government in its different institutions and ministries and the citizens because of years of neglect, lack of modernisation and rampant corruption," said Ezzeddine. "Citizens can hardly get good quality services on time and they have to resort to shortcuts and bribery to get served."

"Lebanon cannot sustain such inefficient administration that still relies largely on conventional paperwork in the age of the internet. Digital transformation is no more a luxury," the minister stressed.

"It is the trend everywhere in the world and in a few years'

time, it would be very difficult for Lebanon to communicate with the outside world without having this soft infrastructure."

A smart administration does not imply the mere automation of work inside the ministries and public service facilities, Ezzeddine explained. "If you have your files on Excel sheets it does not mean you are smart. Smart entails different work processes. It is a complete radical change in the mindset and in the way we are building the infrastructure for our work," she said.

"If Lebanon wants to fix its hard infrastructure, such as roads, electricity and water, it needs an administration that is capable of handling projects and large amounts of money. You cannot do this in the best and most transparent way except if you have a digital administration. This is one way to track every single penny and mitigate the risk of corruption."

OMSAR is conducting a major review of human resources management, including testing and recruitment schemes and the advance-

ment and promotion systems.

"We are building capacities within the public sector by training people who can be trained and by bringing in new blood. All it takes to achieve that is to have the political will and support," Ezzeddine added.

Promoting civil society's contribution to policymaking, through an active and influential partnership that consolidates democracy, reform and economic and social development, is at the core of a citizen-centred administration. To that end, OMSAR has begun a programme opening channels of communication to allow the assessment of the needs of the local communities.

"The civil society in Lebanon not only complements the government but it replaced it in many instances when it was absent due to political instability. Through the AFKAR programme we are trying to set a good example of how this partnership can be positive, can push things forward and can be beneficial to everybody," Ezzeddine said.

"The role of the civil society is very important because it sheds light closely on social problems that sometimes the government on

purpose or because of political considerations chooses to evade," she added.

The AFKAR programme allows civil society organisations input into projects through proposing measures, advocating changing articles or for enforcing the legislation. Civil society has spearheaded efforts against domestic violence, on mental health, access to government information and the amendment of the penal code on sexual harassment and punishment for rapists.

"At OMSAR, we are taking the first steps towards having an open government and make citizens our partners but we cannot do this without digital transformation," the minister remarked. "Digital transformation is a prerequisite for open governments; otherwise how can the government communicate with its citizens without having the means to put all your projects, plans, ideas and expenses online?"

Ezzeddine insisted that digital transformation is inevitable for the reform and development of public administration. "It will reflect positively on the business environment, on investment classification and international indicators for business and for anti-corruption, in addition to enabling Lebanon to communicate with the outside world with the common tools that are now available," she said.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.



Accommodating citizens. Inaya Ezzeddine, Lebanon's state minister for administrative reform. OMSAR

Fighting gender-based violence through art

Myra Abdallah

Beirut

Women's fight against violence is a constant battle. In the Arab world, gender inequality has been one of the most defective characteristics on which the society is built and the most powerful reason behind gender-based violence.

However, physical violence is not the most dangerous type of gender-based violence. Women in Arab conservative societies suffer from a systemised inequality shaped throughout centuries of silencing women and carving a perfect patriarchal system that reinforces male privileges against women's right to be equal.

Eager to defend their rights, women have resorted to an array of tools and platforms – protests, literature, newspapers, television and many more, including the use of art to raise awareness of gender-based violence and promote women's rights.

Jordanian artist Rand Abdul Nour's recent series of paintings evolving around a major violation of women's rights in Jordan, particularly Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code, constituted an outspoken expression of her activism against gender-based violence.

"I was angry because [Article 308 allowed] women members of parliament to worry that victims of rape won't be able to get married and Jordanian media accused victims of consensually being part of the rape," Abdul Nour said.

"I want violence against women to end and art is my medium. As painters, we have a bigger role than painting. We are also documenters. We are anthropologists, too."

Abdul Nour spoke at a confer-

ence organised by the Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, in collaboration with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). The event was part of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence in December.

Jordan's Article 308 that allowed a rapist to escape punishment by marrying his victim was scrapped in August 2017 after years of campaigning by women's activists.

A similar event, organised by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UNFPA December 15 in Beirut, portrayed adolescent girls fighting gender-based violence through pictures,

videos and drawings.

Fighting gender-based violence through art has been a tool long used by feminists and feminist movements. Art has been a powerful political tool for most of history. As much as political leaders used art for indoctrination and propaganda purposes, activists and human rights defenders used art to break taboos, address inequalities and send political messages. Hannah Wilke, Renate Eisenegger, Ewa Partum and Frida Kahlo are a few of the numerous women artists who challenged gender inequalities and social norms through art.

"The importance of art as a medium to raise awareness on gender-based violence has been an integral part in fighting societal and legal control on women's bodies," said

Maya El Helou, an expert at the Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre in Beirut.

"Patriarchal societies derive a big part of their power from controlling women's bodies, either through policing them or through exploiting them, including economic exploitation," Helou said.

"In many Arab countries, women do not have the freedom to decide what parts of their bodies they show. Their private lives, including getting married and having children, are rarely under their control. When they are subject to harassment and sexual violence, they are often blamed by the society.

"As well, women's body is being used as a sexual object of attraction. In advertisements and male-produced art, it is a means to attract

customers or viewers."

Helou contended that art has been historically an important medium for breaking taboos and pointing out social violations through portraying women in a way that is uncommon, yet eye-opening.

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"Painting, sculpting and performing free women from chains preset by the society. It allows women to express their feelings, especially their anger, towards the inequalities they face daily. It also opens important conversations about male privileges and dominance, stereotyping and exploitation of women's body," Helou said.

For Abdul Nour, human rights are crucial motive for her work. She said her paintings were of a scale that allows viewers to put themselves in the shoes of portrayed victims.

"It is true that art can't abolish violence but it can open the conversation," she said. "Then, it is the viewers' role to start making the change in their own circles."

Fighting gender-based violence is a long process that starts with deconstructing the social, legal and economic roots of gender inequality, Helou argued.

"Resisting patriarchy and violence through art is an important medium of communicating feminist ideas. The patriarchal system affects all society equally. Toxic masculinity is one form of its consequences and the burden of that violence always falls on the shoulders of women," she said.

Myra Abdallah is an activist on gender issues.



Challenging inequalities. A painting by Jordanian artist Rand Abdul Nour.

(Provided by Myra Abdallah)