

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL
REPRESENTATION:
THE CASES OF LEBANON AND TUNISIA

by
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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
January 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Carmen Geha, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration. I am truly thankful for my advisor's support, encouragement, prompt guidance, and scholarly advice throughout the process of working on this master's thesis.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis committee members, Dr. Samer Frangie and Dr. Hilal Khashan, for their very helpful feedback and timely suggestions that allowed me to develop and complete my thesis.

I cannot begin to express my thanks to my boyfriend Niklas who supported me every step of the way, especially during the most stressful moments. I am very thankful for the continuous support of my brother Kamil who always encourages and inspires me and my mother Wafaa who taught me a lot.

Many thanks to my best friends who continue to provide me with a lot of love, encouragement, and positivity.

I also would like to gratefully acknowledge the efforts of the interviewees. I truly appreciate their time.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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for

Master of Arts

Major: Political Studies

Title: Structural Challenges to Women's Political Representation:
The Cases of Lebanon and Tunisia

Women's severe underrepresentation in the political systems of numerous countries in the Middle East and North Africa is the result of many challenges that exist at different levels. These challenges do not only affect the underrepresentation in terms of numbers but also have a major impact on the ability to have meaningful representation of women in politics. Therefore, this thesis aims at addressing the following question: How can the patriarchal structures, social and political practices, and power dynamics limit or even prevent the existence of meaningful representation of women in Lebanese and Tunisian politics? Experiences of Lebanese and Tunisian women politicians and views of experts on the two cases are analyzed in order to address the main question of the study. Additionally, the relations between obstacles that women face as they try to assume political positions on the one hand, and the existing patriarchal structures in both Lebanon and Tunisia, on the other hand, will be examined. Studying such relations will demonstrate how social, cultural, and systemic factors influence each other solidifying the barriers with which women have to deal. Lastly, the benefits of gender quotas will be analyzed and presented, and the efficiency of existing mechanisms, such as women's empowerment programs, will be questioned.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Several perceptions related to rights, freedoms, and even gender roles have been challenged by the political and social developments of the uprisings in different countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Regional protests have presented new opportunities that could potentially strengthen women's involvement in the demanded change since women played an essential role in the struggle for freedom and social justice. However, elections in the MENA region are still mostly governed by under-theorized informal institutions that favor men as decision-makers.

Multiple methods have been suggested or implemented to deal with the severe underrepresentation of women in politics of the MENA region. Most of the methods focus on providing women's empowerment projects and training programs that tend to fall short of the expected results. Even though such projects have some positive aspects, they often fail to deal with the structural obstacles that should be removed in order to provide women with a better level of representation. Furthermore, the MENA region lacks a clear and well-developed roadmap for politically ambitious women to enter politics and compete against men.

Moreover, a major issue that contributes to the lack of strong, effective representation of women in Arab politics is the existing state feminism and the limited access to political positions, which mainly happens through political inheritance from male politicians. According to a report by the Economic and Social Commission for

Western Asia (ESCWA), “patriarch societies seem more accepting of women’s participation in politics if it is acquired through inheritance”.¹

Women’s underrepresentation in several political processes in the MENA region has multiple layers and aspects. Even though there are several studies and programs to address this severe underrepresentation, there is also a lack of further steps that should be taken to enable women to meaningfully participate in public life on various levels of governance. Despite the benefits that can be brought by having quotas to increase headline figures in the parliaments of the MENA countries, representation in state structures beyond the legislative can lead to greater involvement of women in politics. Women should be involved “in the public service, the judiciary and local councils [to] provide a recruitment pool for future leaders at the national level”.² Improving the representation in these spheres helps to increase the levels of acceptance of women’s contribution to governance. Enhancing the meaningful representation and acceptance reduces the risks of having women’s rights taken away if the political atmosphere changes and provides opportunities and tools for women to participate in formal and informal political processes.

A. Research Question

The thesis aims at illustrating the links between the lack of meaningful representation of women and the existing patriarchal structures and political practices in Lebanon and Tunisia. Additionally, the study questions the possibility of having meaningful representation in the context and reality of Lebanese politics and Tunisian

¹ Mehrinaz El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. “Women’s Political Representation in the Arab Region”, (Beirut: ESCWA, 2017), 20.

² El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. “Women’s Political Representation in the Arab Region”, 2.

politics. Therefore, the following question can be stated: What does the representation of women in politics, or lack thereof, tell us about electoral institutions, social structures, and challenges women face in Tunisia and Lebanon? Lastly, the thesis looks at the potential benefits that could be gained by having gender quotas in the two countries, in addition to examining the ability of the existing women's empowerment programs to deal with real challenges.

While many studies focus on gender quotas and the representation of women in the legislative branch of the government, this study expands the examination of women's meaningful involvement in different power structures. The descriptive and explanatory purpose of the study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by presenting a detailed comparative study on women's political representation in Lebanon and Tunisia.

B. Assertion of the Question

Patriarchal structures and practices continue to play a central role in influencing or shaping many aspects of people's lives globally, but even to a more significant extent in the MENA region. Therefore, looking at the underrepresentation of women in Lebanese and Tunisian politics, but also at the lack of meaningful, effective representation of women's demands can be helpful to shed light on the needed structural reforms or changes. Analyzing the views of women politicians and experts on both the Lebanese and the Tunisia case is beneficial to draw the links between the deep-rooted patriarchy and the lack of meaningful representation.

C. Significance of the Study

The study aims at adding to the existing literature on the challenges facing women's meaningful political representation in the MENA region. Women's activism and involvement in politics are increasingly important topics, especially in the MENA region that has long discriminated against women in politics and their ability to be included in the decision-making processes. The results shed light on mutual as well as unique challenges in Lebanon and Tunisia.

This thesis can offer a new perspective concerning the aforementioned challenges by examining how they solidify the lack of meaningful representation. The study also sheds light on the need to have approaches that deal with this lack of meaningful representation of women, and how such approaches should be suitable for the geopolitical and cultural circumstances of the MENA region. Additionally, several sections of this study acknowledge the importance of intersectionality as a framework to look at the lack of meaningful representation of women in politics. This importance of intersectionality as a framework is related to the hierarchal nature of the patriarchy that enables socioeconomically privileged women to make it to politics more easily in comparison with less privileged women. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the belonging of one person to different identity groups results in a unique experience that cannot be reduced to a single identity category.³ Understanding the complexity of this experience is helpful to analyze the meaningfulness of women's political representation in Lebanon and Tunisia. Women from lower socioeconomic classes, and

³ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping The Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, And Violence Against Women Of Color", *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241, doi:10.2307/1229039; Ange-Marie Hancock, "When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality As A Research Paradigm", *Perspectives On Politics* 5, no. 01 (2007), doi:10.1017/s1537592707070065; Kristen Kao and Lindsay Benstead, "The Importance Of Intersectionality: Gender, Islamism, And Tribalism In Elections", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, doi:10.2139/ssrn.3676332, cited in Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 242.

the issues and lived experiences of these women, are more underrepresented. This thesis will examine the relation between intersectionality and the underrepresentation of women in politics. However, intersectionality will not be used as the main framework due to the fact that it would require a separate data collection process that focuses specifically on intersectionality and the underrepresentation of women.

D. Terminology and Coding

1. Key Concepts

Presenting a good analysis of main points throughout this thesis requires clarifying and defining major concepts. This process of clarification should provide a better understanding of the contextual meaning of these concepts that will be used frequently throughout the study.

One of the concepts that constitute a central element in the research question is ‘meaningful representation’. The definition that will be used here as it is strongly linked to the purpose of this thesis is presented by Amanda Garrett as the ability of women to represent their interests and demands meaningfully in politics. This type of representation requires a certain level of “competence, credibility, or even interest” so that women who assume political positions actually reflect the reality and demands of women in society.⁴ The significance of this point will be questioned through the interviews with the experts on the Lebanese and Tunisian cases. Furthermore, the term ‘substantive representation’ was used in the interviews and in the data analysis process. The reason for using ‘substantive’, and not only ‘meaningful’, and the reason for not using them interchangeably is because substantive provides more specificity in the type

⁴ Amanda Garrett, "An Easy Concession Or Meaningful Representation? Minority Women In French Politics", *French Politics* 15, no. 2 (2017): 166-186, doi:10.1057/s41253-017-0027-8, 181.

of representation. Perhaps the definition used by Karen Celis and Joni Lovenduski, based on two previous pieces of work by Celis and Childs, could provide more clarity. ‘Substantive representation’ is defined as follows: “effective attention to one’s issues and interests in terms of policy – requires responsiveness to, the inclusion of and the egalitarian consideration of the views, issues, and interests of all groups of women, not only those of privileged women. It demands the inclusion of potentially conflicting interests in the process of representation, as well as various forms of egalitarian deliberation to define women’s interests and reach a judgment about how to establish gender equality”.⁵

Two terms mentioned in the aforementioned definition are also used in this thesis. While the term ‘inclusion’, and especially from a political perspective, can be potentially vague, Lora Berg offers a very beneficial definition. ‘Political inclusion’ is defined as follows: “engaging all in the community in political processes, such as civic education, voting, running for office, and offering input to representatives as policies and legislation are developed, thereby creating a sense of agency and belonging”.⁶ Based on this definition, women’s engagement in the Lebanese and Tunisian political systems, at various levels, is examined. The other important term is ‘gender equality’ and the following definition, from the Victorian Government-Australia’s website, is referred to when the term is mentioned in this study: “Gender equality is when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Everyone is affected

⁵ Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, "Conservatism And Women's Political Representation", *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 01 (2018): 5-26, doi:10.1017/s1743923x17000575, and Karen Celis and Sarah Childs, "Good Representatives And Good Representation", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 02 (2018): 314-317, doi:10.1017/s1049096517002426, cited in Karen Celis and Joni Lovenduski, "Power Struggles: Gender Equality In Political Representation", *European Journal Of Politics And Gender* 1, no. 1 (2018): 149-166, doi:10.1332/251510818x15272520831085, 150.

⁶ Lora Berg and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, “Achieving Political Inclusion”, *GMF Alumni Read-In for the Paris Inclusive Leadership Summit*, (2019), 1.

by gender inequality - women, men, trans and gender diverse people [...]. It impacts people of all ages and backgrounds”.⁷

The term ‘uprisings’ is mostly used in the Tunisian context to refer to the anti-government protests that took place in Tunisia and also across much of the MENA region in the early 2010s. The term ‘Arab Spring’ is not used in this thesis for a few reasons such as the ones mentioned by Isaac Avery. One problem with the term ‘Arab Spring’ is that “the grouping of the diverse MENA region into the homogenising term ‘Arab’ ignores the region’s cultural idiosyncrasies. The term grossly oversimplifies the complex and varied nature of the Middle East and assumes people of the region are culturally and ethnically similar; with a shared history, culture, religion and language”.⁸ Additionally, the word ‘Spring’ “is problematic as it denotes an expectation that events would follow the example set by the West. It is a reference to the democratic European revolutions of 1848, often known as ‘Spring of Nations’, ‘People’s Spring’ or ‘Springtime of the Peoples’”.⁹

2. Coding

The names of participants in this study, politicians and experts, will be kept confidential. Therefore, all the interviews were coded based on two main elements:

1. The country where the participant is from or the case study that the participant is an expert on, i.e. Lebanon or Tunisia.
2. The status of the interviewee. i.e. politician or expert.

⁷ "Gender Equality: What Is It And Why Do We Need It? | Victorian Government", Vic.Gov.Au, 2021, <https://www.vic.gov.au/gender-equality-what-it-and-why-do-we-need-it>.

⁸ Isaac Avery, "Talkin' Bout A Revolution: Four Reasons Why The Term 'Arab Spring' Is Still Problematic", Middle East Centre, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/01/20/talkin-bout-a-revolution-four-reasons-why-the-term-arab-spring-is-still-problematic/>.

⁹ Avery, "Talkin' Bout A Revolution: Four Reasons Why The Term 'Arab Spring' Is Still Problematic".

Therefore, chapters III, IV, and V include codes like the following: Lebanese Politician-1, Tunisian Politician-2, Expert-Lebanon 4, Expert-Tunisia 3, etc.

E. Methodology

Women's political underrepresentation in the MENA region is a very broad topic. Therefore, studying the factors that contribute to this underrepresentation requires focusing on various aspects, but also choosing specific cases to make the study feasible. Therefore, the study focuses on the challenges to a meaningful representation of women in Lebanon and Tunisia. The two countries chosen in this thesis have a few similar factors that shape certain dynamics related to women's political representation. However, they also differ in terms of historical contexts and political systems, which makes it interesting to continuously reflect on the two cases and compare a few of the major points throughout the study.

The thesis presents significant stages of the Lebanese and Tunisian contexts, but also a thorough analysis of the role played by patriarchal structures in both countries, and how this role contributes to the underrepresentation of women in several ways. The importance of shedding light on the patriarchy comes from the fact that, as the thesis will demonstrate, such patriarchal structures still shape many of the power dynamics globally, especially in the MENA region. The sections that follow focus on the experiences of women politicians and the challenges that they dealt with at different stages of their careers. Moreover, chapter IV provides a deeper analysis of these obstacles by linking the aforementioned experiences to the views of experts on women's political representation in Lebanon and Tunisia.

Therefore, the thesis relies on interviews with politicians and experts as a major source of data. The primary data will be analyzed mainly in chapters III, IV, and V in order to present the finding of the study. The thesis also benefits from secondary sources of data such as academic journals and books. These sources include Deniz Kandiyoti's *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, Joni Lovenduski's *State Feminism and Political Representation*, and Imen Yacoubi's *Sovereignty from Below: State Feminism and Politics of Women Against Women in Tunisia*. These sources were selected based on their discussion of challenges to women's political representation, the role of patriarchy, the existing measures or methods followed in Lebanon and Tunisia to tackle women's underrepresentation, and other issues that are relevant to the research question of this study.

1. Interviews

Thirteen interviews with Lebanese politicians, Tunisian politicians, and experts on the cases of Lebanon or Tunisia were conducted in order to obtain the primary data. All the participants were contacted through their institutional offices, publicly available emails or phone numbers, or after they provided their contact and approval through a mutual contact. All the interviews started by stating that any of the questions could be skipped if the interviewee is not comfortable answering. Furthermore, it was also stated that the interviewee has the right to withdraw their consent and stop the interview altogether or stop the interview temporarily to take a break.

All the interviewed politicians were women who provided information about their experience before and after they managed to assume political positions in their

countries. Additionally, these participants shared their views on the existing barriers in the Lebanese political system and the Tunisian political system, which provided more knowledge on the ways a meaningful representation of women is challenged in both countries. The experts shared detailed views on the factors and barriers that challenge women's political participation as well, but they also presented their opinions on existing measures in Lebanon or Tunisia. The answers from the two cases were compared and described according to common themes or aspects, demonstrating similarities and differences.

After providing their approval, the participants were asked about their preference in terms of conducting the interviews in Arabic or English, and the two languages were used throughout the data collection process. The participants from both countries were asked the same questions. However, the list of questions for politicians focused mostly on the different stages of these politicians' experiences and on the challenges that they faced or have been facing throughout their careers. The questions for experts, on the other hand, focused on collecting clear views on the presence or lack of meaningful representation of women in Lebanon or Tunisia, in addition to questions about the role of civil society and the effectiveness of women's empowerment programs. Furthermore, the benefits of quotas were also analyzed within the context of each case.

The thesis also relies on the use of the Gioia methodology as it provides a systematic approach to concept development. Dennis A. Gioia, Kevin G. Corley, and Aimee L. Hamilton state that the methodology was elaborated and refined to provide an approach for "conducting qualitative, interpretive research and also as a way of guiding

[...] analyses and presentation of that research”.¹⁰ After transcribing the interviews, and translating the ones that were conducted and transcribed in Arabic, similar factors were outlined and patterns were identified to allow an organized presentation of the findings.

F. Literature Review

Women’s underrepresentation at all levels of decision-making in the MENA region demonstrates that, despite some recent measures taken by a few MENA countries, many barriers to women’s political representation remain in place. These barriers are caused by several factors and exist in various intertwined dimensions. Some steps were taken as a solution for the existing barriers. The adaption of quotas is considered one of the most effective ways for improving women’s political representation in some countries. However, the lack of other significant measures to address major obstacles continues to prevent the required meaningful representation. In addition to challenging socio-cultural norms and beliefs, legal discrimination deprives many women of the required tools to be represented within their national political context.

The theorization of women’s political representation has been included in several themes of the literature, and multiple questions were asked about the measures taken to deal with the severe underrepresentation. Such a clear underrepresentation of women in the vast majority of parliaments and governments does not only challenge the normative idea of equality in terms of political representation but also has many negative effects on the actual equality of political involvement for women to take part in

¹⁰ Dennis A. Gioia, Kevin G. Corley and Aimee L. Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor In Inductive Research", *Organizational Research Methods* 16, no. 1 (2012): 15-31, doi:10.1177/1094428112452151, 15.

politics.¹¹ The effects start to reflect on the major purpose of the political structures as a parliament and a government stop playing their role in mirroring the demands and views of the represented population. Furthermore, Mona Lena Krook argues that the type of representation has many implications on the stages and meanings of political representation for a certain group. Krook states that “women offer perhaps the most vivid example in this regard: although they form more than half the population, they constitute only a small minority of all members of parliament worldwide, just over 18 percent”.¹²

The type of political representation in the MENA region is a major issue that has been receiving a lot of attention in the literature. Sahar Khamis and Amel Mili describe feminism in the political structures of the region as top-down state feminism, which has been characterized by its lack of inclusion of women from several backgrounds. When the state has firm control over several aspects of political and social life, in this case, gender issues and how they are addressed become subject to this control. Therefore, multiple MENA governments established tame feminist organizations. These organizations worked on promoting the government’s positions and operated within a restricted space.¹³ Furthermore, these institutions convey an image of a secular and modern country, which serves many political interests of the regime, and increases its

¹¹ Marc Bühlmann and Lisa Schädel, "Representation Matters: The Impact of Descriptive Women’s Representation on the Political Involvement of Women", *Representation* 48, no. 1 (2012): 101-114, doi:10.1080/00344893.2012.653246, 101.

¹² Inter-Parliamentary Union. *Women World Statistical Survey*. Geneva Inter-Parliamentary Union (1995), cited in Mona Lena Krook, "Beyond Supply And Demand: A Feminist-Institutionalist Theory Of Candidate Selection", *Political Research Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2009): doi:10.1177/1065912909336275, 707.

¹³ Sahar Khamis, Amel Milli, and SpringerLink (Online service), *Arab Women's Activism and Socio-Political Transformation: Unfinished Gendered Revolutions*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018;2017;.

legitimacy internationally, especially in the eyes of the West. Therefore, such institutions cannot be considered as indicative of any truly independent women's movements at the grassroots level.

Joni Lovenduski argues that giving women a central role in the government is not only about electing and appointing more women to public office, which is descriptive representation. It is also about involving women's concerns in the decision-making processes, that is, substantive representation. While "increasing women's descriptive representation may lead to the inclusion of women's concerns, it is only one of the several ways of enhancing women's representation".¹⁴ Similar questions are asked by Fiona Mackay as she examines the existence of substantive representation of women in politics. Mackay states that "the presence of women in parliaments and legislatures-at whatever proportion, tipping point or critical mass-does not simply or automatically translate into substantive action on behalf of the unstable category 'women' and their contestable 'interests'".¹⁵ Furthermore, Mackay draws more attention to the role that women could play in the political structures as she argues that there is a problem with the assumption that there are a fixed, unified identity and a common political agenda among women politicians. The point that such assumptions miss is that gendered experiences of women in politics and the location of these women in gendered hierarchies shape the basis upon which they are willing to stand for other women. The article suggests that there is a need for a framework that provides

¹⁴ Joni Lovenduski, *State Feminism and Political Representation*, ed. Joni Lovenduski, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511490996, 2005;2009;, 5.

¹⁵ Fiona Mackay, "'Thick' Conceptions of Substantive Representation: Women, Gender and Political Institutions", *Representation* 44, no. 2 (2008), doi:10.1080/00344890802079607, 125.

substantive representation that does not only focus on the tendency of women political representatives to act for women.¹⁶

Larbi Touaf, Soumia Boutkhil, and Chourouq Nasri present their views on women's political representation in post-2011 politics in the MENA region. The authors state that "after the revolution, women felt betrayed as they were excluded from decision-making circles. The statistics of women's participation in politics are shocking, they hardly made 20% in the electoral lists in Tunisia".¹⁷ Touaf, Boutkhil, and Nasri also state that a debate started in the MENA region after 2011 to ask whether the uprisings brought change to gender inequalities. The debate included two major lines of argumentation. The first line of argumentation states that the uprisings did not bring any meaningful transformation to the situation of women in the region just as it did not positively impact other discriminated groups such as the ethnic and sexual minorities. The second one is that rights are no longer seen as a gift to be granted by the leader or ruling party but rather as things to be taken by the power of the masses. The authors state that considering these two lines of argumentation can be helpful to develop a new discourse to address the issue of women's underrepresentation.¹⁸

The extremely low number of women members of parliaments in the MENA region was addressed as a reality that results from multiple factors that are often intertwined. According to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, there are "structural factors, including levels of socioeconomic development and the proportion of women in professional and managerial occupations; the impact of political institutions, such as

¹⁶ Mackay, "Thick' Conceptions of Substantive Representation", 127.

¹⁷ Larbi Touaf, Soumia Boutkhil and Chourouq Nasri, *North African Women After The Arab Spring*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017, 1.

¹⁸ Touaf, Boutkhil, and Nasri, *North African Women After The Arab Spring*, 8.

electoral systems based on proportional representation; and cultural factors, like the predominance of traditional attitudes toward gender roles”.¹⁹

Mona Lena Krook and Diana Z. O'Brien raise many questions about potential solutions. The authors present their arguments concerning the adoption of quota systems and their effectiveness. Krook and O'Brien state that the usefulness of such systems should be supported by promoting the democratic values of inclusion and sometimes reversing harmful historical trends.²⁰ Moreover, the geopolitical and historical contexts of the MENA region play an essential role in shaping the factors that affect women's political involvement. Due to the unique nature of some of these factors, there have been various arguments about the need to address the issue within the existing contexts. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that many framings that deal with the issue assume the superiority of liberal secularism for solving challenges women face around the world. Therefore, the misunderstanding of unique circumstances leads to the failure of finding solutions.²¹

Considering the unique contexts of the MENA region, a few debates about certain programs have emerged. Women's political empowerment programs are presented to enable more women to run for office and be involved in the political systems in different MENA countries. However, Carmen Geha argues that Lebanon's political system that is dependent on sectarian power-sharing makes these programs less

¹⁹ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Women And Democracy: Cultural Obstacles To Equal Representation", *Journal Of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (2001), doi:10.1353/jod.2001.0054, 129.

²⁰ Mona Lena Krook and Diana Z. O'Brien, "The Politics Of Group Representation: Quotas For Women And Minorities Worldwide", *Comparative Politics* 42, no. 3 (2010), doi:10.5129/001041510x12911363509639, 253.

²¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Debate About Gender, Religion, And Rights: Thoughts Of A Middle East Anthropologist", *PMLA/Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America* 121, no. 5 (2006), doi:10.1632/s0030812900099958, 1621.

effective and not suitable to deal with the formal and informal institutional challenges. The system has long favored men over women in political parties and elections. Therefore, “donor-designed programs to empower Lebanese women to enter politics show no relevance to the real institutional challenges women face. In fact, empirical insights from focus groups and interviews reveal that such empowerment programs are ill suited and disempowering”.²² Furthermore, Geha presents several biographical interviews and supports her main argument by focusing on three main categories of challenges. These types are the challenge of access, the challenge of feasibility, and the challenge of patriarchy, and they reflect the mismatch between the women empowerment programs and the “real challenges”.²³

There is vast literature on the underrepresentation of women at all levels of decision-making in the MENA region. In addition, the literature also provides critiques of certain approaches, such as quotas and women’s empowerment programs. However, there is still a need for a thorough study of the challenging circumstances that shape the experiences of women politicians in some MENA countries in addition to the ability of these politicians to provide a proper and meaningful representation of women and their demands despite all the challenges. The study should question the possibility of having such a meaningful representation in the current geopolitical contexts.

²² Carmen Geha, "The Myth Of Women’S Political Empowerment Within Lebanon’s Sectarian Power-Sharing System", *Journal Of Women, Politics & Policy* 40, no. 4 (2019), doi:10.1080/1554477x.2019.1600965, 18.

²³ Geha, "The Myth Of Women’S Political Empowerment Within Lebanon’S Sectarian Power-Sharing System", 9.

CHAPTER II

PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

Several aspects of the cultural and social contexts in the MENA region are shaped by multiple forms of patriarchy. One of the major forms that strongly exists within the familial structures of societal life is classical patriarchy, which gives men the ability and authority to dominate the small family, but also the extended family.²⁴ Classical patriarchy, which uses tough means of power and dominance strategies, extends to the public sphere, influencing society and the state, and leading to the institutionalization of the patriarchy. The adoption of the classical patriarchy's dominance strategies by the public, hierarchal power of the government in relation to people makes it more difficult to challenge these dominance strategies on various levels.²⁵ Sadly, the separation between the public and private spheres becomes clear and emphasized only when there are attempts to intervene and challenge harmful practices of the patriarchy within the familial structures. The private sphere argument becomes a tool to weaken the required local or foreign intervention that aims at protecting women from violence and marginalization. In such cases, the privacy of the house and family starts to block any attempts to dismantle the patriarchal, hierarchal structure.

According to Lindsay J. Benstead, one of the setbacks that appear in the growing body of literature that discusses the patriarchy in the Middle East is the lack of

²⁴ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274-290, doi:10.1177/089124388002003004, cited in Nasser Yassin and Robert Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, (2019), 36.

²⁵ Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 36.

consideration of the patriarchy's multi-dimensionality.²⁶ Focusing on the patriarchy as a single dimension affects the ability to explain the variation in gender relations in different countries in the region. Furthermore, understanding the patriarchy's effect on women's political participation in the MENA region requires paying more attention to the structural nature of the patriarchy.²⁷ Therefore, Benstead emphasizes the need to give more attention to the interactions between patriarchal structures, economic systems, and religion, in addition to the outcomes that result from these interactions. The author identifies the public and private dimensions as two major dimensions of the patriarchy in the MENA region. Private rights that include matters related to family relationships, such as marriage, divorce, mobility, and inheritance often stem from the interpretation of religious texts. "Public rights concern access to public spheres such as education and politics".²⁸ These rights are influenced by patriarchal practices and power dynamics. Therefore, women's political activity in the region is directly affected by such power dynamics.

Deniz Kandiyoti focuses on gender relations as the outcome of social and political negotiation as she discusses the 'patriarchal bargain'. Kandiyoti's conceptualization of the 'bargain' provides analytical traction to look at women's status within a framework similar to institutional approaches in political science. Women's status becomes subject to the influence of women's agency, which shifts the attention away from deterministic paradigms that focus on factors and forces outside women's control. However, Kandiyoti does not ignore the role played by cultural factors as she

²⁶ Lindsay J. Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy: The Importance Of Feminist Theory", *Mediterranean Politics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 234-246, doi:10.1080/13629395.2020.1729627, 235.

²⁷ Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 234.

²⁸ Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 236.

argues that the bargain takes different forms across cultures. In Deniz Kandiyoti's view, culture varies across time and space. Therefore, 'Arab culture' is not essentialized, and that impacts the dynamics of the bargain.²⁹

A. Patriarchy and the Intersectional Bargain

The multiple forms of the bargain also appear within societies across classes and ethnicities, which is consistent with an intersectional framework. Kandiyoti states that wealthy women, for example, enjoy areas of autonomy that poor women do not. Similarly, the level of autonomy and power might be higher among women from privileged regions and ethnicities than among women, and even men, in less privileged areas. This argument presents the patriarchy as a social and political system that produces "patriarchal outcomes –men over women and dominant classes and clans over non-dominant classes and clans. Women are disadvantaged relative to men and those from non-dominant groups relative to dominant groups".³⁰

Intersectional theory suggests that when an individual belongs to two or more identity groups, each elemental identity becomes inseparably linked to the other. The results of such links cannot be reduced to single identity categories. The different identities become attached to each other in complex and unique ways, which shapes the individual's experience of the world.³¹ Therefore, when one identity, like gender, is

²⁹ Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", cited in Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 241.

³⁰ Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", cited in Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 241.

³¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping The Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, And Violence Against Women Of Color"; Ange-Marie Hancock, "When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality As A Research Paradigm"; Kristen Kao and Lindsay Benstead, "The Importance Of Intersectionality: Gender, Islamism, And Tribalism In Elections", 242.

attached to another one, such as social class, the individual's position within the patriarchal structure becomes directly impacted, which in turn affects the patriarchal bargain and the amount of autonomy that individuals have in this bargain. The role played by the aforementioned belonging to certain identity groups in positioning individuals within the patriarchy demonstrates that the patriarchy is not merely an outcome, but also a system of repression.³² Therefore, individuals who are positioned on the intersection between two groups that have been underrepresented are less able to advocate for equality and justice and more likely to suffer from repression due to the strong political, economic, social, and cultural structures.

Suad Joseph presents an analysis of patriarchy in the 'Arab' context. The author aims at understanding the reasons that make patriarchy very resilient.³³ In addition to the gender aspect, Joseph's definition of patriarchy takes into consideration age and kinship values, which are usually supported by religion.³⁴ In a way similar to the aforementioned method of categorization discussed by Deniz Kandiyoti, Joseph addresses the different forms of patriarchy in the Middle East and focuses on the central role played by kinship in the political systems of the region. However, when addressing social patriarchy, Joseph states that patriarchy is also independently produced throughout social life in ways that are not bound up with kinship. For example, men and seniors have privileges that give them more power and portray them as superior

³² Amel Mahfoudh, "Madawi Al-Rasheed : A Most Masculine State. Gender, Politics, And Religion In Saudi Arabia", *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 35, no. 2 (2013): 112, doi:10.3917/nqf.352.0112, cited in Benstead, "Conceptualizing And Measuring Patriarchy", 242.

³³ Suad Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", *Gender & Development* 4, no. 2 (1996): 14-19, doi:10.1080/741922010, 14.

³⁴ Joseph, S (1993) 'Connectivity and patriarchy among urban working class families in Lebanon,' *Ethos* 21: 4; Joseph, S (1994) 'Brother/sister relationships: connectivity, love and power in the reproduction of Arab patriarchy,' *American Ethnologist*, 21: 1, 50-73, cited in Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 14.

when it comes to assuming administrative, political, and religious leadership positions.³⁵

Discussing the political and legal aspects of the patriarchy demonstrates how the family is considered as the basic unit of society in the constitutions of most MENA countries. Such statements have a major impact on the rights and space given to the individual in MENA societies as the state declares itself responsible to preserve the family as the basis of the nation. The state's involvement happens through legal and political practices that stem from and protect the patriarchal structure of society. Children inherit the national, social, religious, or ethnic affiliations of the father, which weakens the woman's role and ability to pass opportunities to her children. In addition to the fact that the aforementioned social and cultural affiliations strongly influence the political opportunities and participation of the children, men's political/client relationships in the region are often passed on to children. Several political leaders in the MENA tend to ensure that their sons follow them as members of parliaments and heads of political parties. The privileging of politicians' relatives, and especially male relatives, in access to government resources and political positions is very common in most MENA countries.³⁶ The analysis of patriarchy and mainly political patriarchy, by Suad Joseph demonstrates how kinship, gender, and age are used to strengthen a harmful repressive system. Men and seniors would still be privileged compared to women and younger people even if the political system expands to be more inclusive beyond kinship.

Another aspect that demonstrates the legal enforcement of patriarchy as a system and its implications is the laws that privilege men when it comes to ownership

³⁵ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 15.

³⁶ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 16.

and control over wealth.³⁷ In most countries in the region daughters inherit less than sons, and many women are expected not to claim or obtain their full inheritance. The land is given to males in many cases. Religion continues to be politically important, thus, it plays an essential role in supporting these practices. With the exception of Lebanon, all ‘Arab’ states identify themselves as Muslim, and honor some Islamic laws, mainly when it comes to personal status law. Tunisia is an exception as it has civil personal status law, but the role of religion remains an important one, at least culturally, when it comes to several practices related to inheritance. While “Arab Christian inheritance rules usually allow for female inheritance, many Arab Christian women also defer to their brothers. This deference may be forced”.³⁸ Furthermore, males and seniors in the region tend to control better-paid positions due to rigid, oppressive hierarchies and falsely “assumed superiority of men and seniors in specific jobs and professions”.³⁹ In addition, multiple expectations placed on women contribute to the economic disadvantages they deal with as they start to deal with ‘time poverty’. Most women in the region are expected to perform a triple role, exhausting themselves between paid employment, taking care of their household, and raising children. This amount of pressure makes a potential involvement in politics add another load of tasks to an already full schedule. This harsh reality discourages many women from running for office. Men, on the other hand, deal with fewer expectations when it comes to

³⁷ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 15.

³⁸ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 15.

³⁹ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World", 15.

household chores and raising children, leaving them enough time to build political networks and make progress in their careers.⁴⁰

The continuous enforcement of the harmful power dynamics of the economic patriarchy prevents many women from opportunities to gain skills and experience, build professional networks, and establish wealth, all of which are often required to engage in a political career.⁴¹ These economic disadvantages highlight the fact that in patriarchal societies, women with political aspirations tend to find themselves in a situation where they are forced to rely on political networks and wealth initially built-up by male relatives. In similar cases, the political participation of women becomes totally limited to the ones who manage to assume political positions after the death of their fathers or husbands.⁴²

The aforementioned patriarchal practices and beliefs reflect the broad set of barriers to women's political involvement that can be linked to sociological and cultural factors. Several countries in the region have seen progress in terms of bridging certain gaps that have been caused by varying expectations for the social roles and contributions of women and men, such as the literacy gap.⁴³ However, many patriarchal norms and practices still play a pervasive impact on women's political representation. One example of these beliefs is the fact that patriarchy enforces the idea that women are

⁴⁰ El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. "Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region", 20.

⁴¹ El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. "Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region", 20.

⁴² El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. "Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region", 21.

⁴³ El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. "Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region", 19.

the ones who should perform roles of ‘care’, such as education and taking care of household chores.⁴⁴

B. Women’s Agency: History and Experiences

1. From Activism to State Feminism

Analyzing the status of women in the MENA region requires looking at the waves of feminism and social movements in the region, and how these movements interacted with the cultural heritage and religious practices. Women played an active role throughout the rise of national groups during the years of colonialism. These groups opposed, politically, socially, and culturally, foreign occupation.⁴⁵ Women managed to organize and actively arrange themselves into new forms of organizations and groups within the pre-established anti-colonial movements.

Feminist political activism in the region reached a peak during the twenties and thirties, and again in the sixties and seventies with the increased merging of international feminist movements and ideology with the social and political agenda for change in the MENA region.⁴⁶ Several countries in the MENA region started to witness the rise of ‘state feminism’, which entailed the promotion of women’s rights under the guidance, but also the control, of the government. In addition to the major role played by the government throughout that stage, the rise of ‘Islamic feminism’ demonstrated

⁴⁴ El Awady and United Nations. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. “Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region”, 20.

⁴⁵ Vickie Langohr, Marc Lynch, and Lauren Baker, “The Changing Face of Women's Political Participation in the Middle East: How are Political and Social Challenges and Opportunities Evolving for Women in the Middle East?”, (2016), cited in Nasser Yassin and Robert Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 34.

⁴⁶ Joseph, "Patriarchy And Development In The Arab World": 14-19, doi:10.1080/741922010, cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 34.

the influence of religion on the direction of feminism in the region. In some cases, Islamic feminism called for the political participation of women as an Islamic right. But in other cases, the different shades of political Islam may omit this right or put restrictions on the way it is practiced based on certain beliefs or situations.⁴⁷ Asef Bayat presents a description of the variety of Islamic approaches and contexts as he discusses how this variety necessitates different interpretations and potential perceptions of women's rights, including the right to participate in politics. Both Tunisia and Lebanon are presented as examples to show the range from liberal to the most radical in each of them.⁴⁸ However, it is important to acknowledge that the form of state feminism that was introduced in Tunisia, especially the 'top-down' state feminism, makes the Tunisian case quite different from the Lebanese context in terms of the rights and space given to women. This point will be discussed more thoroughly in a following section.

2. Increased NGO-ization: Gains and Setbacks

Secular and modern forms of feminism were advanced by the increased number of non-governmental organizations and foreign liberal interventions in the MENA region. These interventions were accompanied by external funding directed towards supporting women's rights agenda in several countries.⁴⁹ Abu-Lughod points out that the NGO-ization of women's movement can be perceived on both positive and negative

⁴⁷ Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 34.

⁴⁸ Bayat, Asef. *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 34.

⁴⁹ Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 35.

levels.⁵⁰ The work of the NGOs led to an increased interest in different features of women's lives, such as economic, social, political, health, and educational rights. This type of knowledge and work helped advance the advocacy of women from the MENA region in addition to strengthening a bottom-up approach to address several issues.⁵¹ Furthermore, the proliferated NGO-ization was also accompanied by a legal and reformist accord between international organizations, as well as local NGOs, that work on issues related to women's rights and governmental entities. This type of interactions also had an impact on state feminism, leading several governments to commit to treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Both Lebanon and Tunisia agreed to commit to the CEDAW treaty. However, each one of them had reservations on articles they considered relatively 'non suitable' for the contexts of the country and the region. Tunisia became the first country in the region to remove all the reservations and fully adopted the CEDAW treaty in 2014.⁵² However, the aforementioned NGO-ization contributed to increased fragmentation of women's struggles away from one movement. Furthermore, the reliance of such NGOs on foreign funding in a few cases led several patriarchal structures to portray feminism as a foreign concept and a 'Western agenda' that has a negative influence on the culture and traditional values of the region. And while it is sometimes argued that public participation of women in the MENA region

⁵⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Remaking Women: Feminism And Modernity In The Middle East", *The Journal Of The Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4 (1998): 640, doi:10.2307/2661164., cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 35.

⁵¹ Islah Jad, "The NGO-Isation Of Arab Women's Movements", *IDS Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (2004): 34-42, doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2004.tb00153.x; Fateh Azzam "why should we have to "Represent" Anyone?" *Sur : International Journal on Human Rights* 11, no. 20 (2014): 272, cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 35.

⁵² Human Rights Watch. (2014). *Lebanon: Domestic Violence Law Good, but Incomplete*. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/03/lebanondomestic-violence-lawgood-incomplete>, cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 35.

remains marginal due to the deep-rooted cultural and social norms, the continuous activism and the history of women's agency in the region point to the potential change.⁵³ NGOs might be used negatively, in certain cases, to intensify the fragmentation of feminist struggles, but many feminist collectives have been and are still working on making the aforementioned potential change happen. The NGO-ization of feminist causes and women's rights tends to favor a certain class of women. Several projects that receive funding have had little impact on legislative and policy change to affect the most marginalized of women in the two countries. To that end, NGOs have come under critique while at the same time providing a strong basis of advocacy for women's rights. This thesis argues that despite increased mobilization by NGOs and other actors, women remain underrepresented.

The two following sections shed light on a few of the major factors, policies, and institutions that impact the political participation of women in Lebanon and Tunisia. Many of the historical and cultural elements and perceptions mentioned in the previous sections apply to the two cases. But there are also unique circumstances that shape the barriers to women's political representation in both Lebanon and Tunisia.

C. Lebanon and the Need for Gender Equality Policies

1. Country Context

Women in Lebanon deal with severe gender inequality within the sectarian power-sharing system. There are multiple factors that contribute to this extreme underrepresentation, such as the 2016 electoral law that did not include a quota for women in the parliamentary election. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in the

⁵³ Azzam "why should we have to "Represent" Anyone?", cited in Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, 2019, 35.

national dialogue processes, which contributes to the lack of a gendered perspective in the results of these dialogues.⁵⁴

The effects of several conflicts and their devastating consequences on the civilian population made the Lebanese political and social contexts complicated. According to a report published by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), around 75 percent of the Lebanese population was affected by the conflicts in some way.⁵⁵ For numerous years, the lives of many Lebanese people were characterized by “car bombings, shellings, aerial bombardments, disappearances, assassinations, executions, sniper attacks and urban street fighting”.⁵⁶ It is estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 people died during the conflicts. Moreover, hundreds of thousands left the country in order to flee the extreme violence. Several crises were recently impacted by the war in Syria. More than one million Syrians were displaced to Lebanon.⁵⁷ There has been a severe lack of inclusion of women in the attempts to address the consequences of the aforementioned conflicts and circumstances that shape the social and political context of the country. The Taif Agreement in 1989 presented changes to the Lebanese political system and played a major role in shaping the current political context as well.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women | Arab States, 2019, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/10/lebanon-nap>.

⁵⁵ "Lebanon Profile - Timeline", BBC News, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14649284>.

⁵⁶ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 7.

⁵⁷ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 7.

⁵⁸ "Lebanon Profile - Timeline", BBC News.

Another point that can be added to the complexity of gender issues in Lebanon is the fact that the country has 15 personal status laws that govern several affairs such as marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance for the 18 religious denominations recognized.⁵⁹ In this context, the lack of inclusion of women in the legislative and judicial branches has a direct effect on the daily lives of Lebanese women. Therefore, it is essential to look at the legal aspect of such affairs and relations from a gendered perspective, and more inclusion of women in such branches is a necessary step in order to have this perspective. Moreover, the problems and daily struggles of non-Lebanese, including Palestinian and Syrian women, are overlooked in certain cases, which adds another layer to the gendered underrepresentation in Lebanon. The aforementioned issue reflects how the positionality of many women within the Lebanese society shapes the challenges they face. The lack of consideration of this positionality creates a barrier to addressing the struggles.

Financial issues are also part of the difficulties with which women in Lebanon deal. “Despite the fact that women attend university at a higher rate than men (53 percent compared to 47 percent between 2009 and 2010), women’s labour force participation remains dismally low”.⁶⁰ The relatively low number of women who manage or own businesses and companies in Lebanon is affected by multiple social and cultural constraints. Such problems create cycles that are difficult to break without efficient intervention that modifies the circumstances and patterns, and such changes require the representation and presence of women in Lebanon’s political and economic structures.

⁵⁹ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 7.

⁶⁰ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 7.

2. Institutional Arrangement: Positioning, Accountability, and Affiliation

Institutions, organizations, and Gender Focal Points are established as official machinery that aims at addressing the aforementioned problems. The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), which works in collaboration with the Lebanese government to assure equality between men and women in several aspects, represents this official machinery in the country. NCLW was established in 1998 in order to focus on the issue of gender equality that is directly related to the fulfillment and protection of human rights.⁶¹ NCLW's work is strongly linked to the presidency of the Lebanese Council of ministers as the Lebanese government signed and ratified multiple international conventions that aim at addressing gender inequality issues. Another point that demonstrates the positionality of the commission within the Lebanese political system is the role given to female members of the Parliament and female ministers. These two groups of women are considered ex-officio members of NCLW during their term and have a consultative status to the commission. The General Assembly includes 24 members appointed by the Council of ministers for a renewable three-year term, and according to the Lebanese law, NCLW has three main missions: consultative, coordinative, and executive.⁶²

NCLW includes several committees that submit program proposals to the Executive Bureau. The committees work on evaluating and monitoring the activities and projects that are being implemented. The permanent committees are the following: "Legislative Committee, Economics and Labor Committee, Education and Youth Committee, Studies and Documentation Committee, Media and Public Relations

⁶¹ "Home - NCLW", NCLW, 2021, <https://nclw.gov.lb/en/>.

⁶² "Home - NCLW".

Committee, Health and Environment Committee, and finally Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)".⁶³ There are two main sources for the budget of NCLW, and those are what is allocated from the budget of the presidency of the Council of ministers in addition to donations and financial aid that is given by international organizations. Various local, regional, and international organizations play their role as partners of NCLW, which makes the commission's projects subject to the assessment of these organizations. The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World- LAU, UNDP- Disaster Risk Reduction Management Unit, and the United Nations Fund for Population are examples of the partners.⁶⁴ The direct affiliation with the Lebanese Council of ministers makes the commission accountable to the government, and mainly the Council of ministers. The commission seeks to perform its goal by promoting women's rights in Lebanon and enhancing gender mainstreaming in public institutions. The aforementioned goal is supported by the major work done by NCLW to adopt the ten years 'National Strategy for Women in Lebanon (2011-2021)' that focuses on gender equality in the political, economic, legal, and social spheres. NCLW had a major contribution concerning the adoption of the Lebanon National Action Plan (NAP) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.⁶⁵

3. Lebanon's National Action Plan 1325

The Security Council Resolution 1325 highlights the role of women in achieving security and peace in their society. The significance of the resolution also comes from

⁶³ "Home - NCLW", NCLW, 2021

⁶⁴ "Partners- NCLW", NCLW, 2021, <https://nclw.gov.lb/en/>.

⁶⁵ "Home - NCLW", NCLW, 2021

the fact that it aims to shed light on women's capacities to participate equally to men in building communities and leading important processes in order to fulfill the conditions of peace and security. The CEDAW Committee, the UN treaty body tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), urged the Lebanese government to adopt a national action plan to implement this resolution. "The NCLW in collaboration with the Office of Minister of State for Women's Affairs (OMSWA), which was established in 2016, spearheaded the development of the NAP 1325 through a participatory approach with other governmental institutions and civil society organizations, supported by UN agencies" in 2017. The process that was supported by UN Women, ESCWA, OHCHR, UNDP, UNFPA, and UNIFIL was financed by the governments of Finland and Japan.⁶⁶

The stakeholders, and mainly NCLW, have the mission of assessing the implementation of several activities and projects by governmental entities and several organizations in order to enhance the participation of women in all levels of decision-making processes in Lebanon. Other major objectives are focused on the pillars of protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence as well as the prevention of such forms of violence. The final pillar is the 'relief and recovery', which seeks to ensure that "measures are in place to address international crises through a gendered lens and considerations are taken into account for the particular needs of girls and women in the design of refugee camps and settlements".⁶⁷

⁶⁶ "Lebanon Government Adopts National Action Plan On Resolution 1325 On Women, Peace And Security", UNSCOL, 2019, <https://unscol.unmissions.org/lebanon-government-adopts-national-action-plan-resolution-1325-women-peace-and-security>.

⁶⁷ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 7.

The NAP 1325 includes Lebanese girls and women, but also girls and women that live in refugee camps. Therefore, the document presents very beneficial objectives related to the challenges and struggles faced by the aforementioned groups. Furthermore, the NAP can play a great role in looking at the conflicts from a gender perspective, which means emphasizing the need for more representation of women in politics in order to have gendered solutions. The language is clear and demonstrates the goals, indicators, methods of assessments, and financial sources. The NAP also mentions the need to “eliminate gender stereotypes and promote gender equality”.⁶⁸

4. Evaluation

The National Action Plan 1325 can be beneficial in many ways as it emphasizes the need to address several issues faced by girls and women in Lebanon during and after a conflict. Moreover, the involvement of local, regional, and international organizations in the assessment of the activities and projects brings an additional form of accountability. However, the NAP is not sufficient on its own for several reasons. Some of the major stakeholders include or are affiliated with a system that can benefit from actively resisting substantive and meaningful representation of women in politics. Furthermore, the low number of women in the Lebanese Parliament reflects the weakness of several measures. The NAP is a positive step that should be supported by direct measures to enhance the presence of women in all power structures, including visible and invisible power structures.

Moreover, the effect of several factors such as the Lebanese party system and party organization, the lack of political and financial stability, and the dynamics of the

⁶⁸ "Lebanon National Action Plan On United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2019-2022)", UN Women, 29.

sectarian power-sharing structure should be taken into consideration. These factors can hinder the objectives of the National Action Plan 1325 in multiple ways. Therefore, there is a dire need for further, direct measures and steps to support the NAP and the efforts of NCLW.

The membership of the NCLA is also another aspect that can influence the implementation of the NAP. Therefore, increasing the diversity of the members can significantly enhance the role of the commission in its work on the activities and projects related to the NAP and to other strategies.

D. The Tunisian Case

1. Country Context

Historically, feminist activism in Tunisia has been strongly related to the national movement against colonialism. During the post-independence phase, feminists worked on organizing and being politically active, which contributed to the increased awareness of issues related to the severe inequality between men and women.⁶⁹ Lujain Rabat and Gul'Nara I. Gadzhimuradova divide the history of Tunisia after gaining independence from French colonial rule into three different stages. The 'top-down' state feminism period under the rule of President Habib Bourguiba was marked by decisions that "sought to modernize society and resist tribalism and Islamism by building a secular, progressive state. For this purpose, large investments were made in social welfare and education programs, including women's education, resulting in a

⁶⁹ Mounira Balghouthi. *Annasawiyya fi Tunis: Mourawaha bayn Annidal wa Jandarat Assiyasa*, Al-Akhbar Newspaper, 2019. https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/267391.

large segment of educated women among the modern population”.⁷⁰ This top-down state feminism is one of the structural and historical factors that distinguish the Tunisian case from the Lebanese one. The policy of state feminism in Tunisia continued when Ben Ali came to power, but this stage also witnessed the growth of the feminist movement from within, that is, from the ‘bottom up’. The third stage started with the Jasmine Revolution of 2011 and the overthrow of Ben Ali. This period was marked by the increased public discussion of women’s rights, which was affected by the ideologic conflicts between the modernized state and conservative Islamist opposition.⁷¹ The intense political competition between secular and Islamist social projects became more prominent between two opposing groups of female, gender activists. However, Andrea Khalil argues that the 2011 Tunisian Revolution should be perceived as a continuation of a long-term process of social change and that the impact of the revolution on women’s rights has been mostly beneficial.⁷²

While secular feminists managed to organize and mobilize in the post-revolution contexts, Islamist gender activism gained a more central role. The shift of Islamist gender activists from the position of the opposition to political centrality has been mostly affiliated with Ennahda Movement. The secular/Islamist debate has affected the way many Tunisians view concepts related to women’s rights. For example, “the political parties with which leftist feminists were generally affiliated (within the PDM or Modern Democratic Pole) did not lead successful campaigns among poor, grassroots

⁷⁰ Gyulnara Gadzhimuradova and Lujain Rabat. "the Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 2020, *Politikologija Religije* 14, no. 2: 473.

⁷¹ Gyulnara Gadzhimuradova and Lujain Rabat. "the Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 2020, *Politikologija Religije* 14, 477.

⁷² Andrea Khalil, “Tunisia's Women: Partners In Revolution”, *The Journal Of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 186-199, doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.870424. 186.

communities and rural women to the extent that Ennahdha groups did”.⁷³ Even though the diversification of voices about women’s rights can have positive effects, it has led to increased polarization on many important issues related to gender equality in Tunisia. One of the prominent issues in the current context is the economic crisis that is affecting the country, and certain groups suffer from the untoward situation more severely due to the aforementioned positionality.

2. Changes and Setbacks

The Tunisian Revolution has presented an example of the strong role of ‘politics from below’ by demonstrating how citizens influence policies by expressing their demands. The revolution was followed by heated debates concerning “Article 28 of the first draft of a new constitution released in August 2012. The initial draft of Article 28 contained the term ‘complementary’ to refer to women in relation to men”.⁷⁴ Advocates encouraged the use of the term ‘equal’ in the constitution. However, supporters of Ennahda were in favor of ‘complimentary’, which led to public protests. These protests in addition to the circulation of petitions succeeded in leading to the decision to drop the word ‘complimentary’.⁷⁵ This success represented one step in an ongoing journey to challenge the harmful framing of women within formal documents.

Looking at the historical interactions and the mutual influence between religion and politics in Tunisia reveals that there have been continuous attempts to gently

⁷³ Khalil, “Tunisia's Women: Partners In Revolution”. 187.

⁷⁴ Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, “Equal Or Complementary? Women In The New Tunisian Constitution After The Arab Spring”, *The Journal Of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 230-243, doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.857276. 231.

⁷⁵ Gadzhimuradova and Rabat. "The Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 480.

“liberalize” Islam by presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali as they implemented their aforementioned ‘top-down’ state feminism policies. According to Gyulnara Gadzhimuradova and Lujain Rabat, such steps enabled women to have more rights and involvement at the legislative level in addition to becoming widely represented in the government. Therefore, implementing certain ideas of modernity and secularism helped support the involvement of women in various aspects of public life, in addition to curbing Islamist rhetoric in the country. However, Bourguiba’s attempts could not ignore or try to erase the strong historical religious roots in the North African nation.⁷⁶ Gadzhimuradova and Rabat add that in a way similar to what Bourguiba did, Ben Ali tried to integrate feminist politics into his agenda, which played an influential role in the continuous increase of women’s representation in the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia.⁷⁷

According to Valentine Moghadam, “Tunisia had long boasted impressive numbers of women in Parliament, impressive both at the regional and global levels”.⁷⁸ However, the impressive statistics were used to conceal the reality of Tunisia’s state feminism that systematically marginalized poor and rural women. Taking that reality into consideration, the state feminism maintained by Ben Ali’s regime was not part of a feminist agenda as much as it was part of the regime’s public image on the world stage. Ben Ali’s regime organized conferences to promote itself as a leader of female liberation, and these conferences presented statistics that eclipsed the institutional

⁷⁶ Gadzhimuradova and Rabat. "The Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 478.

⁷⁷ Gadzhimuradova and Rabat. "The Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 480.

⁷⁸ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Colo: L Rienner, 1993, cited in Khalil, “Tunisia's Women: Partners In Revolution”. 193.

exclusion of poor women and women outside the power circle.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Imen Yacoubi argues that even though state feminism in Tunisia has enhanced women's participation in several spheres, it has made them vulnerable in many other ways, especially in relation to political agency and autonomy.⁸⁰

However, the rise of Ennahda Movement to power after the overthrow of Ben Ali in 2011 led to many fears of increased religious influence of society and politics, which might threaten the liberal legislation on women's rights adopted in the past decades. The fears were accompanied by intensified polarization between women politicians who won in the 2011 elections as representatives of the Islamist party and their secular counterparts. The former group believed that women's role in public life should also come with religious, and traditional interpretations of women's rights. The latter group rejected this view and advocated for more modernist interpretations of the role of women in both the public and private spheres.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Khalil, "Tunisia's Women: Partners In Revolution". 193.

⁸⁰ Imen Yacoubi, "Sovereignty from Below: State Feminism and Politics of Women Against Women in Tunisia." *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2016): 256.

⁸¹ Gadzhimuradova and Rabat. "The Role of Women in the Political Life of Arab-Muslim Countries: Examples from for Tunisia and Lebanon.", 480.

CHAPTER III

UNDERREPRESENTED WOMEN: INCLUDED OR MARGINALIZED?

A. Women and the Uprisings

The systemic exclusion of women in politics in the MENA region is a product of several social, economic, political, and legal policies and practices that form a set of deep-rooted challenges to women's participation and representation. Analyzing the nature and structure of those policies and practices can also demonstrate the obstacles that women continue to face even after they succeed in assuming political positions. These obstacles to representation gained even more attention after the increased visibility of women as participants in the uprisings in the region. This attention increased mainly due to the role that women played in the uprisings and to the political trajectories following mass protests which tended to sideline women from decision-making. As a response to this sidelining, Vickie Langohr, Marc Lynch, and Lauren Baker discuss the important impact of women's social and political mobilization in the region. For example, "new forms of activism and large-scale expansion of satellite media have begun to change the public discourse concerning sexual violence".⁸²

Additionally, prior to the uprisings, civil society actors had a history of presence in the MENA region, but their ability to induce change and provide women with tools for meaningful political representation was limited. The aforementioned tactics used by several political regimes in the region worked on continuously controlling civil society

⁸² Vickie Langohr, Marc Lynch, and Lauren Baker, "The changing face of women's political participation in the middle east: How are political and social challenges and opportunities evolving for women in the middle east?", (Washington: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post, 2016), 2.

through monitoring and strict legal regulations. Nasser Yassin and Robert Hoppe argue that another important point to consider when looking at the role played by civil society in the region is the structure of this civil society. The authors provide a description of two forms of Arab civil society, and those are “al-mujtama ’ al-ahli’, or civil society in the traditional sense-as organized forms that are based on communal, kin or religious belonging, and ‘al-mujtama’ al-madani’-i.e. the ‘civil’, which is more literally ‘society of the city’-indicating an organized civil society that answers to the shift from rural/tribal to urbanized society”.⁸³ While the former is more traditional and closer to the shape of the local community, the latter is more liberal and secular.

Civil society groups contributed to preparing the grounds for the uprisings through years of work and activism. However, according to Yassin and Hoppe, it is important to question the role of civil society actors and whether it contributed to orchestrating the uprisings. Moreover, the authors also address how civil society actors were able to navigate times of uncertainty created by the uprisings by playing the role of “buffer’ between several conflicting parties in the region. In a few cases, the uncertainty has given a chance for the civil society to grow in number. In Tunisia, for example, there was “an increase in number of civil society organisations from a little less than 10,000 to almost 15,000 by 2012”.⁸⁴ There has also been an expansion in the geographical distribution of these organizations in multiple districts in the country and away from the capital or the coastal cities of Sfax and Sousse. The previous

⁸³ Nasser Yassin and Robert Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World* (repr., Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

⁸⁴ Yassin and Hoppe, *Women, Civil Society And Policy Change In The Arab World*, (2019), 4-5.

centralization of civil society in the capital used to make it easier for state security apparatus to control or strongly influence the work of such organizations.⁸⁵

Major contributions were also made by feminist collectives that paved the way for more advocacy on gender rights during the protests in both Lebanon and Tunisia. According to Catherine Moughalian and Zeina Ammar, many feminist groups with diverse priorities and approaches have been active in Lebanon “despite a constraining social, economic, and political context”.⁸⁶ The continuous activism of these movements demonstrates dissatisfaction with the continuous attempts of political elites to sideline women’s demands or provide token representation in certain cases. These movements are still making demands for change as Moughalian and Ammar state that there has been rich production of feminist content online and offline in the past few years. Such production has been in the form of artistic products, journalistic writings, and academic publications that aim at continuing the activism and document oral histories.⁸⁷

The Tunisian case also presents many feminist movements that made numerous significant contributions for decades. According to Maro Youssef, “Women activists played a key role in the progressive gender legislation they have in Tunisia today”.⁸⁸ Youssef adds that Tunisian feminist activism allowed women to have their voices heard by policymakers tasked with designing new gender policies.⁸⁹ The post-revolution

⁸⁵ Sawssan Abou-Zahr, "A Women's Revolution Within The Lebanese Revolution — Peace Insight", Peace Insight, 2020, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/womens-revolution-within-lebanese-revolution/?location=lebanon&theme=women-peace-security>.

⁸⁶ Catherine Moughalian and Zeina Ammar, *Feminist Movement Building in Lebanon: Challenges and opportunities*, (Oxfam, 2019), 20.

⁸⁷ Moughalian and Ammar, *Feminist Movement Building in Lebanon: Challenges and opportunities*.

⁸⁸ Alex Reshanov, "Women’S Activism In Tunisia", *Lifeandletters.La.Utexas.Edu*, 2020, <https://lifeandletters.la.utexas.edu/2020/06/womens-activism-in-tunisia/>.

⁸⁹ Reshanov, "Women’S Activism In Tunisia".

period brought more activism as more women's associations were formed. The authoritarian Ben Ali regime permitted only two secular women's associations to be active. This reality started to change after Ben Ali's removal from office.⁹⁰

Looking at the case of Lebanon, women played an active and major role during the 2019 uprisings as they were present everywhere on the frontline. "Women led marches and orchestrated the chants on megaphones; blocked roads; formed human shields between angry protestors and violent security officials; and bravely resisted attacks and tear gas". However, this strong presence in the uprisings leads to questions about the hurdles that continue to hinder women as they demand justice and try to establish a new political structure where they are fairly and equally represented.

The aforementioned points about the obstacles, the uprising, and civil society, in addition to questions about the latter's role in providing women with support as they pursue careers in politics will be addressed in following sections. Additionally, this thesis will identify different structural challenges based on a thorough and organized analysis of the experiences shared by the politicians and experts that were interviewed.

The structural challenges extend over many aspects of women's lives in the MENA region as these challenges can be social, economic, political, or legal, and they are often intertwined. For example, women in the region deal with several negative social norms and practices that became part of a larger structure that includes barriers hindering women's participation in politics. In many cases these social obstacles were in fact institutionalized, making it difficult to separate between the social and the legal, and between the private and the public.⁹¹ Some of the main social challenges that still

⁹⁰ Reshanov, "Women'S Activism In Tunisia".

⁹¹ Dipa Pate, "The Indigenous Challenges Facing Arab Women In The Middle East And North Africa Economies", LSE International Development, 2019,

have a strong presence globally, but especially in the MENA region are related to traditional views on gender roles. This relation affects women's participation across all strata of the labor market,⁹² but also women's presence in the political sphere. Therefore, the aforementioned relation demonstrates a strong link between the assumptions about gender roles in the MENA and the ongoing exclusion of women in politics. The discrimination also extends to the legal system, affecting electoral law and civil status law, for example.

Similarly, the relation between the legal, economic, and political aspects becomes clear if we look at personal status laws in multiple countries in the region. Legal discrimination against women when it comes to marriage and inheritance, for example, should be addressed in order to dismantle misogyny and harmful patriarchal structures across the region. And according to Hayat Alvi, Tunisia has made some progress in terms of addressing this severe legal inequality, but there is still a lot of work to be done throughout the MENA region.⁹³

B. Women in Politics: Patterns and Realities

Looking at the experiences of the women politicians that were interviewed for the purpose of the study, it is noticeable that there are both shared struggles and unique

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2019/09/06/the-indigenous-challenges-facing-arab-women-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-economies/>.

⁹² "Improving Working Conditions For Women In The MENA Region", Giz.De, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/73447.html>.

⁹³ Mona Eltahawy, "Seven Years after the 'Arab Spring,' Tunisia is Leading in Another Revolution – on Women's Rights," The Washington Post, January 31, 2018: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/31/seven-years-after-the-arab-spring-tunisia-is-leading-another-revolution-on-womens-rights/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7062213b5ccf, cited in Hayat Alvi, *The Political Economy And Islam Of The Middle East*, (2020), 76.

aspects. In order to gain a thorough understanding of these experiences, similar patterns have been identified using the Gioia methodology. In their article *Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology*, Dennis A. Gioia, Kevin G. Corley, and Aimee L. Hamilton state that it is important to seek similarities and differences as we conduct the research, and then to form categories based on that. This categorization process makes the data manageable as we start to have themes, narratives, dimensions, and a deeper structure.⁹⁴

1. Tough Beginnings: Gender-based Obstacles?

While most of the interviewed women politicians stated that the early stages of their careers included addressing obstacles related to their gender, a few of them had different experiences. Lebanese Politician-1 states that she grew up in a family that was not involved in politics. However, the fact that she grew up seeing many members of her family prioritizing social issues and being active in terms of supporting others made Lebanese Politician-1 aspire to have a job that enables her to have direct contact with people who deal with social challenges.⁹⁵ This interviewee adds that her career choice, which was not directly political, was also not related to her family's jobs, emphasizing that the political position she gained later is not inherited in any way. Shedding light on the main point, which is the gendered aspect of the early stages, Lebanese Politician-1 states that this aspect became clear immediately once she started working. She mentions that before becoming a politician, she managed to become a managing partner in a firm, which was very rare at the time. She maintained this position for over two

⁹⁴ Dennis A. Gioia, Kevin G. Corley and Aimee L. Hamilton, "Seeking Qualitative Rigor In Inductive Research", *Organizational Research Methods* 16, no. 1 (2012): 20, doi:10.1177/1094428112452151.

⁹⁵ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author. February 17, 2021.

decades, and she has always been surrounded by a majority of men in her area of work. The interviewee adds that “this role [job] helped me in multiple ways. It allowed me to help others through my work and, in terms of organization, it taught me about the hierarchy of positions, and that nothing should prevent you, whether you are a woman or a man, from taking the highest position at work”.⁹⁶

Another participant, Lebanese Politician-3 addresses the gendered aspect of the challenges she faced at the beginning of her career as she states the following about the work she did before becoming a politician: “I was very involved in activism that aims at including women in politics, especially advocating quotas. [...] Before the elections, we also worked on a campaign that focuses on including women in the political sphere in response to the Beijing Conference and in relation to supporting quotas. I also wanted to challenge and change the masculine mentality”.⁹⁷ Emphasizing her lack of affiliation with Lebanese political parties, Lebanese Politician-3 states: “I am not affiliated with any political party. However, I had some political aspirations without being committed. [...] My name has emerged in politics perhaps due to my activism in women conferences, in addition to my activism in my university”.⁹⁸

Lebanese Politician-2 shares her thoughts about the early stages of her career as she states the following: “I was very involved and active with the students’ cell [of a political party] at my university back then. After that, I became much more involved in the political party and in politics, and I was at the same time studying and doing other

⁹⁶ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

⁹⁷ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author. February 25, 2021.

⁹⁸ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

stuff, like as a journalist, as a political activist, and so on”.⁹⁹ And while the two aforementioned politicians, 1 and 3, mention that there was a prominent gendered aspect in the challenges with which they dealt at the beginning of their careers,¹⁰⁰ Lebanese Politician-2 states the following: “I faced challenges, sure, but I do not think that because I am a woman, I had to face those obstacles. Not at all. On the contrary, I think that if any successful man was at my position, he would have also faced the same challenges”.¹⁰¹

While the previous participant feels that the obstacles that she faced were not related to being a woman, most of the interviewed politicians linked the beginning of their careers to gender-based issues. Tunisian Politician-1 shared the following about the start of her experience in politics: “Actually interestingly enough, my experience in politics started at birth because my grandfather, from my mother’s side, was [engaged in Tunisian politics]. And then my father as well was kind of a member of a political party as a student. He was very active. He studied abroad [...]. When he came back, he was not, in a way, a public servant, but was always politically active”.¹⁰² In comparison with two of the previous Lebanese interviewees who emphasize the fact that they do not belong to political families, this participant makes it clear that she comes from a political family, but she also addresses how this belonging led to negative perceptions about her thoughts and views when she was starting her activism and career in politics.¹⁰³ Tunisian Politician-1 states the following: “So, I think that [coming from

⁹⁹ Lebanese Politician-2. Interview with author. February 15, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Lebanese Politician-1 and Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

¹⁰¹ Lebanese Politician-2. Interview with author.

¹⁰² Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author. February 22.

¹⁰³ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

a family of politicians] kind of influenced me, but when I was younger, I felt that it was a negative influence rather than a positive one. Because I felt that I had to always be careful what I say, and that was very frustrating. And I do not know if it was the experience of women, but every time I had a political opinion, I had to be really careful, because people thought that was my father's or my grandfather's opinion, and it would kind of reflect back on them. But it was not. My father and I have extremely different views".¹⁰⁴

The harsh reality of gendered barriers facing women with political aspirations becomes even more clear when we look at a case where a woman who is an activist, an expert, and a member of a political party has been faced with severe discouragement. Tunisian Politician-2 shares how she has been constantly challenged "specifically as a woman"¹⁰⁵ as she played a major role in constructing the local structures of her party. This interviewee states that she often felt that there has been a lack of recognition for her efforts. Addressing an early stage of a potential more advanced career in politics, she states the following: "Once I tried to run for a seat in the parliamentary elections given my name and presence which made it clear that I will run for my district, the party leader issues a decision that a man from a well-known family and with certain financial assets must run for office. They said to me 'despite your efforts and even though you have all the requirements, you are a woman'. I mean, I could have done very well. I did not have any problems as the media and the people supported me".¹⁰⁶ This interviewee also adds that the fact that she is not from a politically well-known family contributed to the decision made by her party. She also adds that after this

¹⁰⁴ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹⁰⁵ Tunisian Politician-2. Interview with author. March 13.

¹⁰⁶ Tunisian Politician-2. Interview with author.

incident, she felt that there is an unfair gendered division of labor and frustrating stereotypes about women. According to Tunisian Politician-2, this experience demonstrated the severe exploitation of women that deprives them of the freedom to allocate their time and energy to what they want. Instead, the unfair stereotypes and structures tie women to a domestic role.¹⁰⁷

When asked about the beginning of her political awareness and interest in pursuing a career in politics, Lebanese Politician-4 focuses on the fact that when she was a kid, she noticed how the area from which her family comes was marginalized. Also growing up in Beirut made her pay more attention to the differences between the capital and her family's region that she used to visit regularly. At some point, she started to question these differences and the reason many areas in the country suffer from harsh deprivation.¹⁰⁸ And in a way similar to the experience of Lebanese Politician-3, this participant discusses how she started to become more politically engaged during her college studies. The interviewee adds that "there were multiple political parties in my university back then [...] and there was an active student movement. Even though those were tough times, there was a nice feeling that we all had a national struggle that gathered everyone".¹⁰⁹ Lebanese Politician-4 continues to discuss how she started her career in politics years later, and how she dealt with challenges related to the way she was perceived by others as a woman. The interview states that her candidacy for office "has been attacked because I am a woman. A few people issued statements asking: 'so we will be ruled by a woman?'. And now they apologize saying 'we made those statements, but we apologize because you have

¹⁰⁷ Tunisian Politician-2. Interview with author. March 13

¹⁰⁸ Lebanese Politician-4. Interview with author. February 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Lebanese Politician-4. Interview with author.

proven your capability through hard work and by staying in contact with people and their needs”.¹¹⁰ Another point that has been noticed in this interview and can be linked to the experience of the two interviewed Tunisian politicians is that Lebanese Politician-4 mentions that even when she was dealing with negative statements, there was more support from the youth, which continue to help her overcome many of the challenges.¹¹¹

Based on the aforementioned points from the interviews with Lebanese and Tunisian politicians, it is possible to notice a pattern of major points when it comes to discussing the early stages of a career in politics. The majority of the participants stated that the obstacles were related to their gender. And while a few of the interviewees emphasized that they do not belong to families that have been involved in politics, one of them mentioned that her struggle to start a career in politics was related to that. And another participant stated that coming from a family of politicians led to negative consequences related to the way her views were perceived by others as she tried to prove herself.

2. Continued Struggles: Double Standards

A few major aspects were also highlighted by the interviewed women politicians when they were asked about the unique challenges they continued to deal with after they managed to assume political positions. One of the main points is the severe scrutiny and criticism, in addition to the unique type of this criticism with which men are usually less likely to deal. Lebanese Politician-1 states that “the challenges were

¹¹⁰ Lebanese Politician-4. Interview with author.

¹¹¹ Lebanese Politician-4. Interview with author.

related to the fact that there is additional scrutiny to what women do”.¹¹² Lebanese Politician-3 links the criticism to the fact that the presence of women in the Lebanese political system is still limited in terms of numbers, and she also states that “we [women politicians] have also faced some bullying”.¹¹³ Additionally, Lebanese Politician-3 links the criticism to the ongoing challenges facing the country as she states that: “society in general, especially the youth [...], and also few decision-makers and media professionals, have been challenging us as women.”¹¹⁴ However, we have been overcoming them [difficulties] throughout the harsh circumstances that the country is facing”. This politician also elaborates on the type of criticism that she and a few other women politicians dealt with as she states that there were comments like “look how she’s wearing this dress or that jacket”. This interviewee adds the following: “It even got to the point that when we received our positions, there were comments about what we were wearing from tip to toe. They were trying to entertain themselves when we were dealing with different, more serious issues”.¹¹⁵

Lebanese Politician-1 also shares how there were headlines about the way she dressed and presented herself after she succeeded in gaining a political position. The participant adds: “I used to enter a room and feel that there are a few people around who already have prejudgments. I look softer than the others, but the headlines of the articles did not trigger me. When I went to my office, I felt that a few of the employees were alerted. I felt that they used to question what I will wear and how I will present

¹¹² Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹¹³ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

¹¹⁴ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

¹¹⁵ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

myself. This started to change with time”.¹¹⁶ Tunisian Politician-1 dealt with something similar based on the following incident that she shared: “I remember there was a very iconic political event, and someone said to me ‘Oh yeah, take your skirt and go...or take your dress and go’. But in a way, the more misogynist they were, the greater support I had from young people in Tunisia, to be honest”.¹¹⁷

The aforementioned issues highlighted by women politicians represent an example of a long history of misogynist judgment that prioritizes appearance over work and effort when it comes to women in politics. According to Vanessa Friedman, there is no doubt that fashion has been used as a tool to dismiss women and undermine their capabilities. The author adds that the clothes that men in politics wear also get a certain amount of attention. However, articles about men and how they dress generate less attention than a piece on what a woman politician is wearing.¹¹⁸

Delving deeper into the systemic obstacles that women in Lebanese and Tunisian politics face can be helpful to analyze challenges created by the strong patriarchal structures. For example, Lebanese Politician-1 states that “we cannot discuss these issues without looking at the context, which is the patriarchal society. We all know how dominant the patriarchy is. Women need to make twice as much effort to be able to stand out in politics”.¹¹⁹ This participant links the issue even more to the reality of Lebanese politics. She states that women who entered the political system in the past relied on political inheritance through a deceased father or brother and that recently “if there has not been support from a prominent political party, women would

¹¹⁶ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹¹⁷ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹¹⁸ Vanessa Friedman, "Why We Cover What Politicians Wear (Published 2020)", Nytimes.Com, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/17/style/why-we-cover-what-politicians-wear.html>.

¹¹⁹ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

not have managed to assume political offices”.¹²⁰ The interviewee also adds that based on her experience, “the electoral system in Lebanon requires strong party competition, unfortunately, and therefore you must be supported by the party to be able to be a politician”.¹²¹

One point that was emphasized by another Lebanese interviewee is the need to prove one’s skills and capabilities. Lebanese Politician-2 argues that even though she stated that the challenges with which she dealt at the beginning of her career were not necessarily gender-based, the reality was different later. The participant mentions that “a woman in politics has to do double effort to prove that she deserves a seat. While men are perceived as politicians by nature, women have to prove their capabilities in politics. A woman has to be very knowledgeable. She has to take firm decisions and be tough”.¹²²

Tunisian Politician-1 highlighted the fact that the unique nature of the obstacles faced by women in politics is a global issue by saying “I think that there are a lot of unique challenges faced by women in politics and not by men. However, I think that 80 or 90% of them are worldwide, like even in the UK, US, Germany, or anywhere. One example is not being listened to when you say something, and then a man in the cabinet or parliament says the same idea, and then people react to that but never react to yours”.¹²³

While she also addresses the need of politicians to prove that they are qualified for their position, unlike the other interviewees, Lebanese Politician-3 states that this

¹²⁰ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹²¹ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹²² Lebanese Politician-2. Interview with author.

¹²³ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

need is not a gendered issue. This participant states “There are men who can prove themselves immediately, and other men who can stay [in power] for many years without being able to do that. [...] Therefore a citizen, a man or a woman, needs to prove one’s capabilities”.¹²⁴

3. *What Can be Done?*

Reflecting on the shared experiences of the participants makes it clear that despite the existence of a few differences, which is expected, there are social and systemic challenges that the interviewees had to deal with because they are women. Therefore, it is beneficial and only logical to ask the politicians themselves about what can be done to change the harsh realities. Tunisian Politician-1 approaches this question by stating that women should be supported to take risks. She shares one incident that made her realize that this need to encourage women to take positions exists in every area of work and not only politics.¹²⁵ “I met a CEO of a major German company one time. He told me this story that stayed with me. He told me ‘Look, when I promote men, they always say ‘sure’, and most of them would say ‘why did you not ask earlier?’”. And he said that when he promotes women, women often say ‘Oh I am not sure I can do it’”.¹²⁶ Therefore, Tunisian Politician-1 was able to make use of this story as she made additional effort to convince a few women to take a job as she hired her top team. She states that most of the women were hesitant but ended up being very successful in their roles. And when asked about her opinion concerning why women tend to be more hesitant to accept certain jobs, Tunisian Politician-1 stated the

¹²⁴ Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

¹²⁵ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹²⁶ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

following: “I think women sometimes want to be liked. We are kind of taught that we want to be liked and accepted, and when you are in politics or actually in a high position as a woman it is almost impossible”.¹²⁷ Therefore, this aforementioned issue can be linked to the ongoing social pressure with which women constantly deal.

Lebanese Politician-1 argues that there are two major aspects that can be addressed when thinking about how to make the path towards political positions less challenging for women. The first part requires the Lebanese political parties to provide women with support. Women who are members of the party should assume leadership roles within the party and should be supported to be active. The second part is related to the support that should be provided by civil society to women who are politically active but not affiliated with a certain party in the country.¹²⁸

Sharing “success stories” is a point that is highlighted by Lebanese Politicians-2 and 3 and as a way for women who already succeeded in their political careers to help other women with political aspirations.¹²⁹ Tunisian Politician-2 focused on the need to directly address structural obstacles by using legal and systemic mechanisms and reforms.

¹²⁷ Tunisian Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹²⁸ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

¹²⁹ Lebanese Politician-2 and Lebanese Politician-3. Interview with author.

CHAPTER IV

DISCRIMINATORY STRUCTURES

The structural and deep-rooted nature of the challenges faced by women in politics reveals that there is a lack of effective measures to deal with the severe underrepresentation of women in the region. And this lack of effective gender equality measures explains the slow progress in terms of providing women with the required space in the political systems. While Chapter III sheds light on the several layers of intense obstacles faced by women in politics by analyzing the different stages of multiple politicians' careers, this chapter will present the views of experts. Linking the experiences of women politicians to the perspective of experts can be helpful to have a thorough understanding of the reality with which women in the MENA deal. Furthermore, the experts provide informed opinions as well as facts on the existing equality measures and on the lack of effectiveness of such measures and programs in certain cases.

A. Patriarchy in Action: Society and its Restrictions

While local laws and international agreements are sometimes presented to argue that women have not been prevented from being present in politics equally to men, the social and cultural inheritance continues to shape a major structural barrier.¹³⁰ When asked about the main challenges that contribute or lead to the underrepresentation of women in Lebanese politics, Expert-Lebanon 1 argues that women are constantly faced

¹³⁰ Misbah Al-Shibani. "Al-Mousharaka Assiyasiyya lil Mara'a al-Arabiyya wa Ma'alatiha al-Mouta'athira fi al-intiqal al-Democrati al-Rahin: Attajruba Attunisiyya Mithalan". *The Arabic Magazine for Political Science* no 47-48. 2015. 151-168.

with the societal attitude that makes women feel they do not belong in politics.¹³¹ The interviewee elaborates by stating that “women start telling themselves what they are told”, and that usually includes discouraging statements.¹³² Expert-Lebanon 3 answers the same question by discussing three levels of discrimination that lead to the disempowerment of women in general and to the underrepresentation of Lebanese women specifically. One of these three levels is the *behavioral* one that is also linked to society, culture, and traditions. This level of discrimination is highlighted by the interviewer as the most important one as she states that in the minds of several parts of the Lebanese society women are perceived as the ownership of the family.¹³³ The interviewee adds the following: “Such traditional discriminatory ideas still exist and really undermine the role of women. This takes us to the issue of politics, where exactly these preconceived ideas are projected on the candidates or even on the MPs that were recently elected”.¹³⁴

Expert-Lebanon 4 discusses a very important point that can be linked to the cultural aspect by stating that the underrepresentation of women in general but particularly in the MENA region and in Lebanon is a multi-leveled problem.¹³⁵ This interviewee argues that the first level is the *meta* level, which includes norms that govern or shape society.¹³⁶ And on this level, according to Expert-Lebanon 4, “the most prominent factor is patriarchic norms, which are reinforced by both religion and

¹³¹ Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author. February 5.

¹³² Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

¹³³ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author. February 9.

¹³⁴ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹³⁵ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author. July 5.

¹³⁶ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

tradition. These norms confine women and their responsibilities to domestic/private spaces whereas men are generally viewed as the head of the family, dealing with all public matters. This clear division of responsibilities will obviously translate into ideas of who can (in terms of abilities) and should (in terms of morality) be involved in politics”.¹³⁷

Looking at the Tunisian case, a similar point is highlighted by Expert-Tunisia 1 as this interviewee argues that the lack of participation of women in the political sphere and the public life is a result of the patriarchy and the masculine mentality that are pervasive in the MENA region and in Tunisia specifically.¹³⁸ “This mentality prevents women from advancing in our societies sometimes. [...] Additionally, the general circumstances and living conditions of women in the MENA region such as the need to take care of the family play a major role. For example, in certain circumstances like divorce or the death of a husband, women find themselves giving up certain ambitions and plans”.¹³⁹ Expert-Tunisia 3 discusses gender roles and women’s unpaid work as well by mentioning that “in addition to their careers, women have to take care of certain social and familial roles and commitments like taking care of children”.¹⁴⁰ Another interviewee, Expert-Tunisia 2, addresses the ‘domestic role’ that women are expected to play by giving an example from the Tunisian society where the concept of family is established on the idea that women should take care of certain responsibilities domestically.¹⁴¹ This idea does not only create a barrier to devote more energy and time

¹³⁷ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author. July 5.

¹³⁸ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author. April 17.

¹³⁹ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

¹⁴⁰ Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author. April 13.

¹⁴¹ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author. March 13.

for a career in politics or some other area of work, but also strengthens economic structure where women are more exploited due to the large amount of unpaid work. According to Nancy Fraser, gender forms the fundamental division between ‘productive’ work and unpaid ‘reproductive’ and domestic work, but also “the division within paid labour between higher-paid, male-dominated, manufacturing and professional occupations and lower paid, female-dominated ‘pink collar’ and domestic service occupations. The result is an economic structure that generates gender-specific modes of exploitation, economic marginalization and deprivation”.¹⁴²

This previous point is also highlighted by Expert-Lebanon 5 who states that one of the main obstacles created or at least influenced by the patriarchal mentality is the issue of double burden that prevents women sometimes from running for office.¹⁴³ Additionally, the prevailing patriarchal mentality tries to reinforce the notion that women are not made for politics. And as mentioned earlier, these discouraging statements might affect the motivation and preparation to participate in the elections. This interview adds that women often are not provided with the tools to prepare for elections.¹⁴⁴ Expert-Lebanon 4 discusses the issue of perceptions and the preparation process as follows: “I would argue that the main factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in politics include a lack of access and an actual or perceived lack of capacities and capabilities. I want to stress the issue of “perceived” lack, as this perfectly illustrates how the factors on the different levels are mutually

¹⁴² Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (repr., London: Verso, 2003), 52.

¹⁴³ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author. March 10.

¹⁴⁴ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

reinforcing each other and thus constitute a reality that is difficult to transform. Difficult, but not impossible and definitely necessary”.¹⁴⁵

Reflecting on both the Lebanese and the Tunisian case shows the strong influence of the patriarchy on the perceptions and expectations of society towards women in both countries. The fact that many aspects of the private sphere are designed to hinder women’s access to the public sphere makes Lebanon and Tunisia similar in many ways. However, the following section will link the informal social aspects to the more formal factors of women’s underrepresentation, showing that there are indeed differences between the two case studies.

B. From the Informal to the Systemic

The aforementioned social and behavioral factors are accompanied by systemic, gender-specific dynamics that solidify most of the challenges with which women deal when they try to start or advance their careers in politics. These dynamics might include unwritten rules or practices in many cases. Expert-Lebanon 1 explains how many women in Lebanon feel discouraged to consider politics as a viable option, career-wise because they often see that “the chances of getting in elected positions unless they are the sister, wife, or daughter of somebody are low”.¹⁴⁶ Another interviewee, Expert-Lebanon 2, discusses the factors that result from the combination of the cultural environment and the political systems of the MENA region. This interviewee states the following: “The political systems by and large in this part of the world are not inclusive [...] and I would argue that many of these policies and legislation are in fact anti-inclusion and with the aim of designing a political

¹⁴⁵ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁴⁶ Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

environment that suits the ruling elite in the country”.¹⁴⁷ Expert-Lebanon 2 also elaborates on the combined effect of the formal and informal by mentioning the following: “I am talking about those in both the manner of formal politics, but also in the manner of day-to-day interactions and engagement with the policies and the political environment in a given country. So for example, you would have electoral laws that are specifically encouraging or designed basically to ensure a specific form of people to be part of this political process”. These formal rules and informal practices of exclusion affect women more severely.¹⁴⁸

Expert-Tunisia 2 discusses how even the language used in the day-to-day interactions has an effect on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. The example given by this interviewee from Tunisia is the word “مرأة” (“woman” in the singular form) and how it is frequently used in social and political contexts in Tunisia instead of “نساء” (women).¹⁴⁹ Expert-Tunisia 2 argues that the use of the singular form often leads to solidifying the perception that women in society and in politics have the same aspirations and interests.¹⁵⁰ This perception can influence the inclusion of more women in the political system due to the idea that only one or very few women in certain positions can represent the social and political needs of all women in society. It can also create certain expectations about those demands.

Another statement about the Tunisian case demonstrates the relation between the dominant patriarchal mentality in the Tunisian society and the lack of inclusion of women in formal contexts. Expert-Tunisia 1 mentions that the use of the horizontal and

¹⁴⁷ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author. February 5.

¹⁴⁸ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author. February 5.

¹⁴⁹ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

¹⁵⁰ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

vertical method that requires political parties to alternate candidates on the lists between men and women increased the percentage of women in the parliament to 36% in the 2014 elections. However, the percentage dropped when the law was not used in 2019.¹⁵¹ Expert-Tunisia 1 adds: “So in my opinion, the laws are there but the lack of implementation and protection of these laws is related to the rigid mentality, which reduces the ability of women to be politically involved”.¹⁵² Expert-Tunisia 3 discusses the same law stating the following: “We were very happy with the law that allowed women to be included in the political parties’ candidate lists using the horizontal and vertical method. However, we can question how much this law was respected and implemented by different parties”.¹⁵³

Comparing this aforementioned law from the Tunisian case with the Lebanese system demonstrates that even though there are similarities in terms of the dominance of patriarchal mentality and practices in both countries, Lebanon has a system that is even more exclusionary and resistant to change. Expert-Lebanon 2, who discussed the exclusion of different groups of society, especially women, adds that “in Lebanon specifically there is an additional factor that works on this [exclusion], which is the structure. The sectarian political structure that has been in effect since the Taif Accord and probably previously excludes anyone that is outside the key political party or the sects”.¹⁵⁴ This issue means that women in Lebanon do not only deal with a lack of legal measures that can contribute to more inclusion in the political system, but also with

¹⁵¹ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

¹⁵² Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

¹⁵³ Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

¹⁵⁴ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

another structural challenge that affects the whole Lebanese population but women more severely.

While the *meta* level challenges were explained by Expert-Lebanon 4 when discussing the patriarchal norms in society, two other levels can be presented in this section in order to analyze the relation between these norms and the Lebanese political and legal system.¹⁵⁵ Expert-Lebanon 4 states that on a *macro* level, which is the second one, includes the patriarchal norms are mirrored in the laws and policies.¹⁵⁶ This interviewee adds the following: “I guess the main factor contributing to the underrepresentation is the limited quantity and quality of laws and policies that facilitate or ensure the representation of women: such legal or political provisions are scarce and when they do exist, they are often put in place due to international pressures and commitments rather than genuine domestic political interest. Consequently, they lack the necessary political backing, enforcement, and prioritization”.¹⁵⁷ Lebanon’s National Action Plan, which was presented in Chapter II, is provided as a prime example by Expert-Lebanon 4.

According to Expert-Lebanon 4, the *meso* level, which refers here to institutions, shows this link between norms and structural factors as this interviewee explains the following: “There are little institutional provisions in place that would ensure proper representation of women – this is true for the national level (such as parliament and government) but also in the regional and local level (such as municipalities). In short:

¹⁵⁵ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁵⁶ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁵⁷ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

gender equality is not being mainstreamed in such institutions”.¹⁵⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4 adds that when there are institutions that aim at increasing women’s representation, they are “often poorly equipped, politically marginalized, and treated as an add-on”.¹⁵⁹

Expert-Lebanon 3 also discusses the relation between the behavioral factors (referred to as society and culture in the previous section) and the *legal* and *structural* discrimination against women in Lebanon.¹⁶⁰ The interviewee explains that women in Lebanon need to be provided with more legal protection because the existence of a “violent culture against women, specifically domestic abuse, disempowers women and affects their full enjoyment of rights”. And when it comes to the structural level, Expert-Lebanon 3 states that this level can be used to explain how even when the law does not explicitly discriminate against women in certain areas, there are still many practices with which women have to deal as they navigate male-dominated areas of work.¹⁶¹

Based on the factors that have been presented from the Lebanese and Tunisian cases in this section, it is possible to state that while there are similarities between the two cases, Tunisia seems to have more measures that can bring change to the underrepresentation of women in the country. According to Experts-Tunisia 1 and 3, the requirement to alternate candidates on the political parties’ candidate lists was helpful in 2014, and even though it was not a perfect solution to the underrepresentation of women in Tunisia, it did bring more positive results.¹⁶² On the other hand, Lebanon

¹⁵⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁵⁹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁰ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁶¹ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁶² Expert-Tunisia 1 and Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

presents a unique set of challenges due to its political system. Expert-Lebanon 4 states the following: “The sectarian nature of the political system most certainly contributes to the manifestation of these [aforementioned] structural factors: it reinforces an elitist, interest-driven, divisive and tradition-based environment that adds additional layers of structural barriers to the political participation of women”.¹⁶³

C. After the Inclusion: Experts’ Views

The first two sections of this chapter focused on the different factors that lead or contribute to the severe underrepresentation of women in Lebanese and Tunisian politics. The different levels of these factors were presented and the links between the formal and informal were analyzed to provide a clear picture of the structural nature of the underrepresentation. This section aims at analyzing the obstacles faced by women after they manage to assume political positions in Lebanon and Tunisia in a way similar to Chapter III. But this time the challenges are looked at through the views of experts in both countries. While it was essential to learn about such challenges from the women politicians themselves, this section provides a more general perspective in order to assess the different standards that women and men in politics meet.

Expert-Lebanon 2 explains the issue of ‘political violence’ by stating that many women are attacked after assuming political positions because they are women. The interviewee adds that what makes women’s experiences in politics different from men’s experiences is the fact that the pressure includes two main aspects for women. The first one is the scrutiny of one’s behavior as a political person, which is a type of scrutiny

¹⁶³ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

that both men and women deal with.¹⁶⁴ However, the second aspect is unique to women. Expert-Lebanon 2 explains: “When you are a woman, there is another layer of pressure on you, which is basically asking ‘What are you doing for women? Who are you? Why did you get to this position? Why don’t you have a Ph.D. in politics?’” You do not fit because you are a woman”.¹⁶⁵ Expert-Lebanon 3 also states that the scrutiny that women in Lebanese politics deal with is very harsh due to the tendency to look for any mistake that women politicians might make to prove that they are not qualified.¹⁶⁶ Another interviewee, Expert-Lebanon 1 addresses the cyberbullying that women in politics face, and especially the sexualized nature of this bullying. This interviewee states that the attention is often focused on women politicians’ looks rather than on their work and accomplishments.¹⁶⁷ Expert-Lebanon 5 discusses the same issue by stating that women politicians are often not taken seriously. The interviewee adds that there is a tendency to focus on women’s looks and private lives, and to use that for entertainment.¹⁶⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4 addresses the issue as follows: “I do believe that women’s capabilities will often be fundamentally questioned, resulting in (a) them not being taken seriously and (b) putting them in a position of constant justification for holding the position that they do. Political spaces – be it parliaments, governments, ministries or political parties – are still proper ‘boys clubs’ – networks are being created and upheld between like-minded people (i.e. men)”.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁵ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁶ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁷ Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁸ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

¹⁶⁹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

The aforementioned point concerning the “boys clubs” can be linked to the way many political processes and structures are designed to include certain groups of politicians, mainly men. For example, Expert-Lebanon 5 talks about how most meetings are done in ways that do not cater to the availability of both men and women. The interviewee adds: “There is no attention to particular details related to women”.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, according to Expert-Lebanon 5 politics in Lebanon becomes “men working with men on the best interests of men, and sidelining women”.¹⁷¹ Expert-Lebanon 4 also states the following concerning the meetings and networking issue: “Women will rarely be invited to these networks, yet this is where politics often really takes place. Without access to these networks – and consequently without important information and power needed to meaningfully shape politics – women are being sidelined”.¹⁷²

Looking at the Tunisian case demonstrates that there are also several challenges faced specifically by women politicians. According to Expert-Tunisia 1, “when women succeed in assuming political positions, they face great obstacles. Many men treat them [women] with contempt”.¹⁷³ The interviewee adds that there are cases where men use the concept of honor (الشرف والعرض) in the Tunisian society to attack women in politics rather than focusing on their work. Such attacks aim at affecting women politicians’ personal lives. This point can be linked to the patriarchal mentality that was discussed in previous sections. Expert-Tunisia 1 states that such cases of verbal violence can even extend to physical violence, which can alienate women from working in politics.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

¹⁷¹ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

¹⁷² Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁷³ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

¹⁷⁴ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

Expert-Tunisia 2 also addresses the relation between women's political careers and their personal lives, but by shedding more light on the effect of the former on the latter. This interviewee states that in addition to the difficulties faced by women at work, the husband, if the woman is married, often expects the woman to fulfill certain responsibilities at home. While men in politics rarely deal with such expectations, women might find themselves under immense pressure from their families.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, Expert-Tunisia 2 states that women politicians are usually scrutinized harshly compared to men in politics. For example, society and the media expect women to dress, sit, speak, and laugh in a certain way, according to this interviewee. Expert-Tunisia 2 states that "a man can show up with less attention to the way he looks [...], but when a woman politician shows up on TV, there are usually comments focusing on how she looks from head to toe".¹⁷⁶ Expert-Tunisia 3 addresses similar points mentioned by other interviewees by focusing on the duties that women are socially expected to fulfill at home in addition to their political careers. The aforementioned immense pressure created by these expectations is often combined with meetings scheduled late at night in a way that excludes women politicians from important discussions.¹⁷⁷

Based on the multiple factors shared in this section, it is possible to reflect further on the points that are similar in Lebanon and Tunisia when it comes to women's political underrepresentation. Most of these similarities demonstrate the strong influence that the patriarchal expectations and practices still have in the two countries. Therefore, the few differences between the Lebanese and Tunisian cases, which were

¹⁷⁵ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

¹⁷⁶ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

¹⁷⁷ Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

highlighted in the previous section seem to be the result of the different political and legal systems more than anything else.

D. Meaningful Representation? Equality and Intersectionality

Analyzing the underrepresentation of Lebanese and Tunisian women can also be extended to include looking at the type of representation provided by the women who managed to assume political positions in the two countries. Additionally, questioning whether women in politics provide substantive or meaningful representation to the women of their country can be helpful within the context of this study. Expert-Lebanon 4 addresses this question about substantive representation by stating the following:

“Personally, when I think about representation, I think of two things: representation of people in institutions and representation of people’s ideas, concerns, and needs in policies, in short – representation through people and through policies. In order for such representation to be substantive, I believe that representation really must include the concepts of equality and intersectionality”.¹⁷⁸ Based on this understanding of what representation means, the representation of Lebanese women by women in the political system cannot be described as substantive. This interviewee also adds that women are often grouped with social minority groups when in fact they constitute roughly 50% in most societies.¹⁷⁹ “No political institution or body in Lebanon comes even close to equal representation of women. Yet – even if we theoretically assume such equality were given – it will not be substantive without an intersectional representation”.¹⁸⁰

Furthermore, while most women who assume political positions in Lebanon, according

¹⁷⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁷⁹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁸⁰ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

to this interviewee, are middle to upper-class, well-educated, and more or less moderately religious, the Lebanese society is very diverse and complex as it includes women “who are all shaped by their individual interplay of religion, age, socio-economic status, residential area, marital status, education, sexual orientation, gender identity, (dis)abilities, legal status and so on. This level of diversity is currently not reflected by those female politicians we see in Lebanon today”.¹⁸¹ This lack of representation has an effect on the policy-making process that fails to provide equality and intersectionality.¹⁸²

According to Expert-Lebanon 2, there is an expectation that women who are assuming political offices are promoting gender equality agenda, but this is not always the case in reality. The interviewee adds that anyone in a political position, a man or a woman, should be asked about the work they are doing in relation to their position. However, bringing in higher expectations and assuming that because that person is a woman, she should be pro women’s rights is not a correct assumption, to begin with. Additionally, many women who work in politics try to distance themselves from women’s agendas sometimes because they do not want to be perceived only as advocates for women’s rights.¹⁸³ Expert-Lebanon 2 adds the following: “I think the long-term demand is that women are politicians in their own right. I think part of being political is believing in advancing human rights, believing in advancing issues of equality and non-discrimination. That should be at the heart of any politician. However, [...] for the time being, my demand is to have more women in formal politics

¹⁸¹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁸² Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁸³ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

regardless of their position on gender equality matters because they have the right to be in politics regardless of whether I agree with what they demand or not”.¹⁸⁴ Expert-Lebanon 3 presents an important point as well by stating that there are still so many problems at the *legal* level when it comes to gender equality in Lebanon. Therefore, women politicians should advocate for women’s rights simply because they are human rights.¹⁸⁵

Expert-Tunisia 3 argues that women in Tunisian politics play a very active, successful role when it comes to fulfilling the duties of their political positions. The COVID-19 pandemic, according to this interviewee, demonstrated how women politicians in the country can respond effectively to crises, providing plans with more transparency.¹⁸⁶ Expert-Tunisia 2 provides a different perspective from the following: “Unfortunately, there is a lack of politically strong women in Tunisia [...]. Therefore, women in the political parties and women who have political positions, in general, do not represent Tunisian women most of the time. They do not voice the concerns and demands of women beyond the existing limits or agreements”.¹⁸⁷ The interviewee adds that many of these politicians showed more excitement to advocate for women’s rights before they received their political positions, but they started to provide less support later. Expert-Tunisia 2 also states that there are a few examples of women politicians who continued to advocate for women’s rights throughout their careers, but they often dealt with immense pressure.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

¹⁸⁵ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁸⁶ Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

¹⁸⁷ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

¹⁸⁸ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

Another interviewee, Expert-Tunisia 1 states that women in Tunisian politics belong to different parties with different ideologies. Therefore, the ability and tendency of women politicians in Tunisia to support issues related to gender equality rely, in many cases, on the role they play in their political parties. According to this interviewee, women politicians from Ennahda movement, for example, often support patriarchal mentality and structures, which means a lack of support to issues related to gender equality.¹⁸⁹

Based on the analysis of the experts' views concerning the meaningful representation of women in Lebanon and Tunisia, it is possible to notice a few major points, such as the importance of both equality and intersectionality when it comes to the concept of representation. Moreover, it is noticeable that the political structures in both countries limit the ability of women in politics to advocate for issues related to gender equality, and perhaps this situation is more severe in Lebanon than in Tunisia.

While chapter III provided suggestions to deal with the challenges based on the personal experiences that the interviewed politicians had, quotas and women's political empowerment programs will be further examined through the experts' perspective in the following chapter.

¹⁸⁹ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

CHAPTER V

CHANGING OR EMPOWERING?

Discussing potential methods to address women's underrepresentation in the MENA region often includes shedding light on quotas, but also on women's empowerment programs. While the former aims at making structural modifications that have been very helpful in most cases, the latter focuses on working with women or encouraging them to participate in politics. This chapter will briefly discuss both quotas and women's empowerment programs based on the views of the interviewed experts, before concluding this study.

A. Quotas: Means to an End

According to Mona Lena Krook in her book *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*, there has been increased interest in gender quotas, making the research on them one of the fastest-growing subfields of research on politics and women. This growing research reflects the surge of interest in patterns of political representation. Krook adds that most of this work on gender quotas focuses on single countries or a single world region at most due to the different dynamics that should be taken into consideration when studying a specific world region.¹⁹⁰ Therefore, presenting the experts' opinions will be beneficial to understand how gender quotas can be very helpful in both the Lebanese and the Tunisian contexts. Another benefit is that the experts respond to a few of the major points that are often used to criticize gender quotas.

¹⁹⁰ Mona Lena Krook, *Quotas For Women In Politics* (repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Expert-Lebanon 1 states that it is possible to confirm that quotas are the most effective tool for increasing women's political participation.¹⁹¹ Another interviewee, Expert-Lebanon 2 argues that even though quotas may not directly influence the women's rights agenda as they might not necessarily bring women politicians who actively support this agenda, the quota itself is a demand. The interviewee elaborates that what makes the gender quota an important demand is the fact that it allows different voices to come into formal politics.¹⁹² Additionally, Expert-Lebanon 3 addresses the debate on the gender quota by stating that there will often be certain views against quotas due to the "quota vs. merit" discussion.¹⁹³ However, according to this expert, quotas are needed to reach de facto equality because even if de jure equality existed, there would still be many factors and dynamics that disempower women at home and also hinder their work in the public sphere.¹⁹⁴ In terms of what steps can be added to work on the behavioral aspect that this interview addressed earlier, Expert-Lebanon 3 states the following: "Having campaigns and raising awareness can be helpful. But the issue with behavior is that it is value-based, and I do not think a 3-day workshop can change what a person believes. If they [society] have been raised to believe that women are inferior, three days will not change that. So, it will take a long time, but it has to be enforced by law, there has to be a quota".¹⁹⁵

Therefore, based on the points shared by Expert-Lebanon 3, there are certain steps that can be implemented to lead to some change. However, such steps should be

¹⁹¹ Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

¹⁹² Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

¹⁹³ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁹⁴ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁹⁵ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

looked at as supplementary actions to support the needed legal change through quotas.¹⁹⁶ Expert-Lebanon 4 provides a thorough analysis of the significance of quotas, in addition to other mechanisms, to strengthen the representation of Lebanese women in politics.¹⁹⁷ This expert explains the following: “We need to be very clear about two things: for one, quotas should be viewed as a tool, i.e. a means to an end, not as the end itself. For another – and very closely related – quotas should be understood as one possible mechanism that can be applied, i.e. it will not solve all the problems, especially not just by itself”. With the said, Expert-Lebanon 4 adds that quotas can be very helpful in providing temporary enforcement of “short- to mid-term change that enables or feeds into a more long-term cultural shift”.¹⁹⁸

Another important point made by Expert-Lebanon 4 is the issue of visibility and how quotas can be helpful with it.¹⁹⁹ This interviewee states that since quotas can enforce a higher level of equality between men and women in politics, a higher level of visibility can be accomplished as well.²⁰⁰ This visibility “sends out messages, not just to women (“You can do this too”) but to society at large (“Women can do it just as well) – it normalizes this new role of women and allows for social discourse. It also forces political parties and other bodies to fundamentally shift their approach and the way they think about women’s inclusion and women’s capabilities”.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

¹⁹⁷ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁹⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

¹⁹⁹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²⁰⁰ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²⁰¹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

Expert-Lebanon 5 elaborates on the Lebanese context by stating the following “We are a country that is obsessed with quotas [...] we have quotas for religious representation and quotas for different positions. So a country obsessed with quotas, I do not understand why is it against the women’s quota that much?”.²⁰²

Expert-Tunisia 2 gives an explanation in order to prove that quotas can be very beneficial globally by stating that quotas, as positive-discrimination mechanisms, aim at accelerating the equality between men and women in politics.²⁰³ Additionally, this interview states that “the use of quotas can be stopped later when the principles of equality and equal opportunity are accomplished”.²⁰⁴ The interviewee adds that considering that there is still a strong cultural aspect that contributes to the existing inequality, enforcing quotas is very beneficial. This beneficial nature of quotas explains why quotas have been recommended by almost all international conventions and conferences on gender equality. One example given by this interviewee is the Fourth World Conference on Women- Beijing 1995, which included important points on the representation of women in positions of power. Looking at the Tunisian case specifically, Expert-Tunisia 2 argues that change was already starting to happen due to the principle of parity which was stated in Decree no. 35- 2011.²⁰⁵ This principle required political parties to alternate candidates on the lists between men and women, in addition to including the youth and people with disabilities in the lists. However, according to this interviewee, these lists were sometimes used as a strategy by certain political parties that later made their successful women members resign in order to

²⁰² Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

²⁰³ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

²⁰⁴ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

²⁰⁵ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

allow the men who followed them on the list to receive the positions. Therefore, the implementation of a gender quota in the country can be more beneficial and effective.²⁰⁶

Expert-Tunisia 3 makes a similar point by focusing on the fact that even though there has been work on the national plan for more gender equality in politics, women are still underrepresented in the Tunisian parliament and the different ministries.²⁰⁷

Expert-Tunisia 1 shares a personal experience by stating that she advocated through her work for a quota in Tunisian politics, in addition to more support for and representation of people with disabilities.²⁰⁸ This last point demonstrates how the structural discrimination in the region can and should be looked at through an intersectional lens as it affects women who belong to certain groups even more than others. Expert-Tunisia 1 adds that “quotas are better than the horizontal and vertical methods of alternating candidates on the list because it guarantees that a certain percentage of women will receive positions”.²⁰⁹

Reflecting on the views of the experts in this section demonstrates that there are several strong factors that make quotas beneficial. While most of the experts on the Lebanese case focused on elaborating on the benefits of quotas, but also responding, directly or indirectly, to the arguments against quotas, the Tunisian experts addressed the already existing mechanisms in the country and compared these systems with quotas.

²⁰⁶ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

²⁰⁷ Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

²⁰⁸ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

²⁰⁹ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

B. Empowerment Programs: Effective or Lacking?

Discussing the existing tools and mechanisms that aim at enhancing women's political participation in the MENA region, and specifically in Lebanon and Tunisia, leads to an important and broad topic, which is women's empowerment programs. One thorough study that discussed these empowerment programs within the Lebanese sectarian power-sharing system was Carmen Geha's "The Myth Of Women's Political Empowerment Within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System".²¹⁰ This study was briefly presented in the literature review section of this thesis.

The experts interviewed for this study shared their views on women's empowerment programs, and when it comes to the case of Lebanon, Expert-Lebanon 1 mentions that it could be more beneficial to start with developing a legal structure to have more women in politics.²¹¹ This interviewee's view is based on the following statement: "there are so many different types of programs, but I think it is true that these programs often tend to look at Lebanon in a depoliticized way [...] if we are trying to look at issues of social justice, we need to be more nuanced in how we address issues of women's political empowerment".²¹² Another interviewee, Expert-Lebanon 2, shares similar points by stating that different programs focus on different aspects, and a few programs have unique elements in them. But this expert also adds that the lack of major changes in terms of women's presence in the Lebanese political scene demonstrates that such programs might not be as effective as they intend to be.²¹³ This last point can be linked to a statement shared by Lebanese Politician-1 who mentions the lack of

²¹⁰ Geha, "The Myth Of Women'S Political Empowerment Within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System".

²¹¹ Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

²¹² Expert-Lebanon 1. Interview with author.

²¹³ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

efficiency of certain campaigns to raise awareness on women's underrepresentation based on this politician's personal experience. However, she adds that such programs can be more beneficial when they are combined with more work with men in politics as she states the following: "We need men to be aware and help recognize women as partners in politics because women are capable".²¹⁴

Expert-Lebanon 4 shares a thorough view on women's empowerment program by stating the following: "I am not aware of any systematic assessments that measured the effectiveness of such empowerment programs but looking at the current state of women's representation in Lebanese politics would suggest that they have unfortunately not been all too effective. The power-sharing system in Lebanon has most certainly been one of the reasons as to why".²¹⁵ The interviewee elaborates by arguing that the Lebanese political system "encourages a rather elitist and traditional political environment that utilizes historical fears and discourages change of the status quo. If not designed and implemented carefully and context-sensitively, such programs could – consciously or subconsciously – certainly contribute to upholding this system".²¹⁶ Based on this view, real structural issues cannot be addressed by empowerment programs that are not context-sensitive. Furthermore, the results of such programs will end up being "elitist, party-loyal politicians or political tokens" according to Expert-Lebanon 4.²¹⁷

Expert-Lebanon 3 provides a similar statement by asserting that what is needed in Lebanon is change enshrined in institutions and "something that is rooted. It can

²¹⁴ Lebanese Politician-1. Interview with author.

²¹⁵ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²¹⁶ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²¹⁷ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

only become rooted once it is democratic and that's the culture that we really lack".²¹⁸ Expert-Lebanon 5 provides a different perspective by stating that empowerment programs can be effective and helpful, but women "should decide to take the driver's seat now" by preparing for the elections in advance and findings voters to support them.²¹⁹

When it comes to the Tunisian case study, Expert-Tunisia 2 states that even though there have been certain small initiatives, there is a lack of organized women's empowerment programs in Tunisia. One issue that this interviewee addresses is the fact that when there are empowerment programs, they tend to focus on specifically inviting women who are already engaged in Tunisian politics as members of political parties.²²⁰ Based on that, Expert-Tunisia 2 states that there is a need to involve women who are still not politically engaged when such programs are organized in order to provide these women with the required skills.²²¹ Expert-Tunisia 3 states that women's empowerment programs can be beneficial when they combine the efforts of both civil society and the Tunisian government.²²²

Expert-Tunisia 1 answered the question about empowerment programs in the country by stating the following: "The Tunisian civil society should have played a more active role in supporting women with political ambitions to develop certain skills such as communication skills, the ability to discuss different topics, the required skills to give

²¹⁸ Expert-Lebanon 3. Interview with author.

²¹⁹ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

²²⁰ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

²²¹ Expert-Tunisia 2. Interview with author.

²²² Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

a speech, etc.”.²²³ Furthermore, the interviewee focuses more on civil society stating that it could also play a major role in raising awareness and providing training on many issues that affect women who aspire to assume political positions.²²⁴ One example that this Expert-Tunisia 1 provides is the need for training programs for journalists and people who work in media in order to address the ongoing violence against women politicians in media.²²⁵ This last point can be related to the statements provided by Expert-Lebanon 5 on the different incidents where women politicians deal with violent and sexist comments on Lebanese TV.²²⁶

It is also worth mentioning that several experts on women’s underrepresentation in Lebanon and Tunisia addressed the role of civil society as well. Expert-Lebanon 2, for example, states the following: “Well, first we need to have more consistency and coherence among the different parts of civil society. Some of the influential civil society groups may not be in line with the idea of pushing forward women’s involvement in politics. And you see this very much often. They would say: ‘this is not our priority’”.²²⁷ This interviewee adds that there is a need to develop an understanding among different organizations of the Lebanese civil society in order to recognize that the concepts of equality and non-discrimination should be used to combat all forms of discrimination and “gender is at the heart of it all”.²²⁸ Expert-Lebanon 4 also states that the sectarian nature of the Lebanese political system influences the political

²²³ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

²²⁴ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

²²⁵ Expert-Tunisia 1. Interview with author.

²²⁶ Expert-Lebanon 5. Interview with author.

²²⁷ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

²²⁸ Expert-Lebanon 2. Interview with author.

mobilization as it takes place along sectarian political party lines.²²⁹ Therefore, according to this interviewee, the true potential of civil society in Lebanon lies in the ability to transcend party lines, organize around major issues, and set them onto political agenda.²³⁰ The expert adds the following: “Women’s empowerment and their political representation is exactly one of these cross-cutting issues where civil society can frame them by highlighting how it concerns all parts of Lebanese society. Therefore, I think some of the most important steps for civil society to take evolve around their potential to organize, mobilize and connect people and to hold those in power accountable”.²³¹ Expert Tunisia-3 also states that civil society can hold the country’s decision-makers accountable and voice the demands for gender equality. One example given by the expert is the role played by one organization in putting more pressure on the decision-makers to adopt a law that deals with political violence against women in Tunisia.²³²

Therefore, based on the aforementioned views, it is possible to notice that the Tunisian interviewees mostly focused on the need for more developed and organized women’s empowerment programs. Looking at the Lebanese case makes it clear that, according to most of the interviewed experts, the existing power-sharing political system will often hinder the effectiveness of women’s empowerment programs especially when these programs are not context-sensitive.

²²⁹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²³⁰ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²³¹ Expert-Lebanon 4. Interview with author.

²³² Expert-Tunisia 3. Interview with author.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The lack of meaningful representation of women is a global challenge that should be a priority to address. A society cannot prosper and develop with a part of its population underrepresented, marginalized, or discriminated against. In this case, this part is actually half of the population. The less women are represented the more the laws and legislation represent the interest of male elites. Based on that, one can provide many economic and political arguments as to why equality is 'beneficial', mainly focusing on the material aspect. While such arguments would be technically true when supported by facts and numbers, it is important to continuously remember that women deserve equal representation because it is the right situation. Equality is logical and should be the norm. Therefore, the aforementioned prosperity and development should be thought of as prosperity of principles and human values before anything else.

Looking at women's presence in the political systems of the MENA region clearly reveals a very harsh reality. The numbers of women in leadership positions are constantly low. Additionally looking at the numbers is not enough, as it is essential to look at the space and role given to women who manage to assume political positions. This study identifies the main barriers to the underrepresentation of women in politics, but also the structural and behavioral obstacles that limit the meaningfulness of women's presence in politics. The patriarchy is analyzed in this study as a repressive system and not merely an outcome. This repressive system continues to impact women's experiences and lived realities. Furthermore, the hierarchal nature of this

system is discussed in order to demonstrate that certain groups of women can deal with more oppression than others based on their position within this structure.

The two case studies, Lebanon and Tunisia, are presented and a few major institutions and events are analyzed in relation to the topic of this thesis. The lived experiences and views of the interviewed politicians and experts are then analyzed providing results that demonstrate that many barriers hindering women's meaningful political participation are linked to the existing patriarchal structures. The similar patterns highlighted through the data analysis show how the two countries are comparable in a certain way, but the distinctions are also highlighted and shown to be the result of contextual and systemic differences.

The thorough research conducted to write this thesis makes me reflect on the purpose of this study, which is not only examining the underrepresentation of women in politics but also analyzing the barriers to a meaningful representation of Lebanese and Tunisian women. In doing so, I began to better understand the powers and structures that shape the institutions of elections and political parties in both countries. The systemic obstacles reveal that there are continuous efforts to exclude women from positions of leadership, and that can be noticed even when a few women manage to assume political positions. Therefore, it is safe to say that even the representation of women portrayed in the Lebanese and Tunisian political system is mostly not substantive. And I believe that this statement is more correct in Lebanon than in Tunisia, due to the sectarian power-sharing system that is designed to prioritize representing the sect, and mostly the political elites, over the demands and rights of women. While the Tunisian system gives more space to women due to the history and structure of the system, there is still a severe exclusion of women from poorer and rural

areas, and the demands of these women. In many cases, women's presence in the political system is targeted at helping the public image of the men who control the system rather than supporting an actual feminist agenda. There are exceptions that can be highlighted by looking at the experiences of a few women politicians who tried and continue to challenge the existing systems as these women advocate for gender rights. Furthermore, it would be unfair to neglect the activism of feminist movements that have been going on for decades in both Lebanon and Tunisia. However, I truly believe that it is important to eventually acknowledge that proper, meaningful representation is very hard to achieve unless the existing contexts are changed. What is required is structural changes and not only empowerment programs. Structural changes can bring the possibility of reforming the concept of representation in the region. One example of such changes would be gender quotas that can provide at least a few feminist women with the required space to advocate and make their voices heard. Lastly, I hope that this thesis will help provide an academic perspective on the required change so that we can see effective mechanisms being implemented in order to have fair representation not only of women in terms of numbers, but of women's issues, struggles, realities, and demands.

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