SHIFTING NARRATIVES: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Milestone 1

Upcoming Municipal Elections in Lebanon and Women's Political Participation

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Overview and Rationale

According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, Lebanon ranks among the countries with the lowest women's political and economic participation (135th out of 146 countries)[1,2]. In Lebanon, women's representation in politics has been historically low[3]. Women have been marginalized in electoral processes, whether in municipal or parliamentary elections, under flawed electoral systems.

In the last parliamentary elections of 2022, only 8 women were successful in securing seats in the parliament. This translates to a mere increase of 2 seats from the previous parliament, considering that the Lebanese parliament comprises 128 seats. Consequently, the representation of women in the new Lebanese Legislative Body stands at 6.25%. This result ranks the country at 172 out of 186 in the world, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global rankings[4].

This result is explained away by a male-led political system in Lebanon that prevents the implementation of gender quotas in municipal and parliamentary elections. The lack of consensus around temporary special measures further reinforces the dominance of men in formal politics and sidelines women, leaving them inadequately represented.

The absence of gender quotas in Lebanese municipal and parliamentary elections can be attributed to various structural barriers. These barriers include a lack of political will and commitment to gender equality among political leaders and decision-makers, which can hinder efforts to implement quotas or other measures to increase women's representation in politics. Additionally, limited access to resources such as funding and training may prevent women from fully participating in the political process, while limited media coverage of women candidates and their campaigns can make it harder for them to gain visibility and build support. Societal biases and stereotypes that view women as less capable than men in political leadership roles may also influence voters' perceptions and support for women candidates. Legal and institutional frameworks that do not prioritize gender equality or provide adequate mechanisms for enforcing quotas or other measures aimed at increasing women's representation are also a barrier. Finally, resistance to change among established political parties and power structures may further hinder efforts to promote greater gender diversity in politics.

With the upcoming municipal elections in May 2023, there is a definitive interest to explore and advocate for the implementation of such a quota. By taking action to promote greater gender equality in politics, Lebanon could create a more inclusive and representative political system that better reflects the diversity and perspectives of its population.

The Embassies of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden in Lebanon, and the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut, held a workshop on February 27th, 2023, on women's participation in municipal elections in Lebanon in light of the expected upcoming elections, as part of a project focused on the economic and political empowerment of women in Lebanon, supported by the Nordic Council for Ministers.

The workshop brought together national and international stakeholders to engage in a panel discussion comprising female municipal politicians, female municipal aspiring candidates, a Member of Parliament, and electoral experts. The discussion explored the current context of women's participation in elections, as well as the challenges and opportunities for their participation. This document serves as an outcome document from the workshop that offers actionable recommendations needed to enhance the presence of women municipal members and to encourage prospective candidates.

1   World Economic Forum. (2022). World global gender gap report 2022. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf
2   Lebanon ranked 119th out of 146 countries on the global gender index, among the lowest rankings.
3   Dagher, G. (2021). Women's participation and representation in Lebanese politics: Electoral performance, challenges. *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.* https://api.lcps-lebanon.org/content/uploads/files/1617105491-women_participation.pdf
4   Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU Parline, Global Data on National Parliaments, 2023. https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=2&year=2023

Challenges Facing Women Members and Aspiring Candidates

The challenges raised in the workshop were barriers women faced at a societal level, familial level, and even an individual level. Despite the difference in nature, all barriers prohibit women from achieving one particular goal: equally pursuing a political career.

1. **A patriarchal culture carries significant societal and political influence.** Lebanon is a country where patriarchal values hold significant cultural and social influence, with male figures often held in high regard as role models and decision-makers. This mindset extends to families, where the perception that men are more competent in leadership roles is prevalent.

2. **The municipal electoral law remains majoritarian and reform efforts did not materialize.** The municipal elections follow a majoritarian rule in which the winner takes all. Majoritarian systems tend to favor privileged groups who already enjoy leverage, which means candidates who belong to marginalized or oppressed groups will not get as much of a chance for representation in the council. As such, if women ran for elections based on their qualifications without support from already established political parties, they might be less popular in the eye of the public compared to their male counterparts.

3. **In Lebanon, confessional and familial political affiliations often supersede a broader sense of national interest, thereby affecting political choices and voting patterns.** This is attributable to the dominance of a familial confessional system that weakens the sense of citizenship in the country. In this context, social justice is an indispensable component of citizenship, whereas the prevalence of economic inequality creates a conducive environment for the confessional familial system to overshadow the government's authority.

4. **The lack of modern democratic civil election protocols poses a great obstacle for women.** The existing system is predicated on sectarian consensus and is deficient in democratic practices. Candidacies for political office in Lebanon are frequently presented through closed lists, which are primarily put forward by political parties - most of which are confessional in nature. This further limits the opportunities available to individual candidates, including women, to contest elections independently and on their own merits.

5. **Women's issues and causes are undermined, especially when it comes to political representation.** In light of Lebanon's multilevel crisis, there is recurrent rhetoric that addressing women's issues and advocating for their causes, such as having more female representation in municipal councils, is not a priority. When the issue of women's underrepresentation is brought up, it is criticized for its current importance in comparison with the economic crisis in Lebanon. Even if a female member of the municipal council were to suggest a project that caters to women's needs, it is likely to be dismissed or not seen as a priority.

6. **A gender quota is absent and there is no consensus on a temporary special measure.** The lack of a gender quota in municipal councils and parliament poses an additional challenge to women who are running for elections. The electoral law places them at a disadvantage. Without a gender quota, women have less space in the political field and they continue to be marginalized. A quota is the only guarantee for women to cross these institutional barriers.

7. **Unpaid care work remains a large burden on Lebanese women who aspire for political careers.** With women being a minority in municipal councils, they are often overlooked. Having to deal with their fate as care workers in a patriarchal society, women are seen rationing in their careers to meet the needs of their families and forsake their interest in leading a political career. Affordable services and support that help alleviate some of the responsibilities may not be available. The suggestion to build such services is often dismissed since it is not seen as a priority in the midst of a crisis.

8. **Women candidates fear judgment in times of failure, especially if they lose the elections.** Most women feel that they need to exert greater efforts than their male counterparts in order to be taken seriously by their colleagues, staff, and society. There is a belief that when women experience electoral defeat, their gender is often attributed as the primary reason for their lack of success. In fact, women often feel the need to prove themselves and succeed in different fields before running for elections to prove to their community that they are capable of success.

9. **Female candidates encounter hostility and harassment during their election campaign, and even if they manage to secure a position, they may still face discrimination on the basis of their gender**. Politics remains informal in Lebanon and it is controlled, for the most part, by men. This can make it an unsafe space for women. According to a UN Women report on Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections, a significant number of women candidates faced different forms of violence, including psychological and emotional violence, physical violence, and sexual harassment. The report revealed that out of the 75 candidates surveyed, 59 (78.6 percent) reported being victims of violence during the election period. The most common setting for such violence was social media, with 45 candidates experiencing abuse online. Among the 59 candidates who were victims of violence, 50 reported experiencing psychological violence[5]. These hostile behaviors lack the constructive element and aim to create obstacles in a woman's campaign. Even if she ends up winning a seat on the municipal council, she might still face criticism due to her gender. During the discussion, many women revealed such difficulties they faced, particularly in their bids for the position of President or vice-President of the municipal council. In many cases, those who were running for elections and speaking up about political issues were subjected to violence, threats, and harassment.

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5   UN Women, 2020, *Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections,* https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/04/Women%20Candidates%20in%20Lebanon%202018%20Parliamentary%20ElectionsReport%20Design%20Adjusted.pdf

Implications of Challenges on Women's Participation in Municipal Councils

The challenges heavily impact women in their attempt to run for elections in different ways. The impact can coexist in an interactive environment since they do not take place in isolation.

1. **The patriarchal system obstructs women's ability to run for elections, whether municipal or parliamentary.** In a patriarchal environment, women seldom receive support from their community or family. These attitudes in combination with the existing electoral laws stand as stumbling blocks for women running for municipal elections.

2. **With a weakened sense of citizenship and the prominence of familial influences, decisions are oftentimes at the center of certain decisions biased against female candidacies.** The patriarchal nature of families often produces outcomes that are not conducive to female political participation. While familial ties can influence decision-making processes, the real problem lies in the fact that this can weaken the practice of democracy by creating a system that is inherently biased against women. Coupled with the existing patriarchal beliefs, this makes it unlikely for families to accept being represented by a woman. This automatically affects the familial backing a female candidate would receive and poses a challenge in garnering support for her campaign.

3. **The lack of democratic practices and environment minimizes women's representation in politics.** Women might better practice political work when democracy is reinforced because they would be evaluated according to their merits. Other candidates who belong to more powerful groups in society, such as men who have the support of their family, community, or sect, hold an advantage over women. Some women may gain political power by adhering to their sects' or families' mindsets, however, these candidates are then a representation of the groups that they have adhered to and not necessarily of all women. Genuine representation is impeded in the absence of a strong democratic environment that empowers candidates based on their abilities and competence.

4. **Undermining women's issues in political processes limits the developmental work that can be achieved.** The contribution of women is indispensable to any development effort. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize women's participation in political and economic spheres. Neglecting this aspect during the implementation of reforms will only impede the prospects of achieving social justice. Comprehensive and inclusive public policies, which involve women and other marginalized groups, are imperative to effectively address the multi-faceted crises confronting the country. This underscores the need for a novel approach to political and municipal work, one that places a premium on the inclusion of women in political processes.

5. **The absence of a gender quota in municipalities exacerbates the exclusion of women.** In a patriarchal society where women encounter various obstacles to being recognized, the absence of gender quotas exacerbates the marginalization of women and accentuates the impediments they confront. Without gender quotas to guarantee women's access to positions of representation, men will invariably hold sway, perpetuating the tendency for such spaces to be controlled by a select few. This is particularly pertinent in majoritarian systems.

6. **Traditional gender role practices often hold women back from participating in politics and running for elections.** The failure to establish an infrastructure that properly supports women may result in a decrease in their participation in politics. In a society that upholds patriarchal norms, women are frequently assigned the role of managing domestic chores. Despite this, many women also pursue professional careers in addition to their unpaid care responsibilities. Balancing these numerous obligations alongside a political campaign or career can prove challenging. Women may find it difficult to obtain support to alleviate some of their domestic workloads, whether it be through services, assistance from a spouse, or help from family members. This can create additional barriers for women who wish to participate in politics.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Women's participation in political and economic life is often hindered by multiple challenges. Some of these challenges are external, such as the patriarchal mindset that dominates the society, the increased scrutiny women are put under, the dismissal they face, the established familial system, and the violence they are met with. These challenges can also manifest as internal struggles that women deal with such as their fear of failure and the stigma or sense of failure that ensues. To combat the barriers and promote women's participation in politics and municipalities, some recommendations need to be put forth.

1. **Reform the electoral system, to include a gender quota.** The municipal electoral law needs to be amended to ensure accurate representation of everyone, especially women and minorities. In addition, implementing a gender quota is vital in order to give women space in politics.

2. **Empower women, motivate them, and develop their skills.** During the discussion, a lot of women shared that they benefitted from the capacity-building workshops they attended where they learned skills that allowed them to run for elections. It is essential to ensure that information related to municipal councils and elections is easily available to promote the integration of more women into political life. This can be accomplished by organizing workshops, technical, and educational training sessions. However, it is crucial to extend these training opportunities beyond just women who aspire to run for elections. A broader audience, including the youth, should be encouraged to participate in these activities to help spread awareness and skills. Such an approach can motivate and empower the youth to take an active interest in politics.

3. **Explore and invest in other measures that can be used to implement a modern civil democratic election mechanism.** Empowering women is crucial, but alone it may not be sufficient to bring about the desired changes. Therefore, it is essential to explore a comprehensive approach to reform the system. One crucial step is to implement educational measures aimed at modifying the entrenched system of values that has perpetuated sexist attitudes and discriminatory practices. Another helpful tool is to introduce affordable childcare services that can help relieve women of the burden of care work, enabling them to participate more fully in the workforce and other areas of life. In addition to that, there are other actions that can be taken to address gender inequality. One such measure is to introduce policies that ensure pay equity and promote women's economic empowerment, such as equal pay for equal work and flexible work arrangements. Another step is to increase women's representation in decision-making positions, both in politics and in the private sector. Creating supportive networks and mentorship opportunities for women can also be helpful, as it can provide them with a sense of community and offer guidance on navigating professional and personal challenges. Furthermore, addressing gender-based violence through legislation, awareness-raising, and providing support services for survivors can create a safer environment for women to live and work in.

4. **Create an intersectional feminist movement that works on the ground and in different regions.** Creating an intersectional feminist movement that operates on the ground and in various regions can be a powerful way to promote gender equality and empower women in Lebanon. While Beirut has traditionally been the center of feminist mobilizations, decentralizing these efforts and expanding them to other regions of the country can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women from all backgrounds. This decentralization can enable female activists and politicians from different regions to lead and facilitate mobilizations in their communities, particularly in rural areas where access to resources and political representation can be limited. An intersectional feminist approach can further strengthen this movement by recognizing and addressing the intersections of gender, religion, class, and other identities that contribute to inequality and discrimination. This approach can help ensure that the movement is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs and experiences of women across Lebanon. Overall, creating a decentralized, intersectional feminist movement can serve as a vital pathway for women to become politically active and mobilize for gender equality and women's empowerment.

5. **Integrate different movements across different levels of government including local and national.** The integration of a feminist agenda within municipal work is fundamental to any structural change. This goes back to the importance of having a new understanding of municipal work and its responsibilities. Feminist and developmental work needs to be integrated to achieve results and needs to be applied both on the national and local levels- these cannot be separated. Feminist issues can no longer be compromised as they have proven to be an instrumental element of socioeconomic development.

6. **Reinforce democratic work and practice accountability.** In the context of women's participation, reinforcing democratic work and accountability in municipalities can be achieved through various specific measures that address corruption, scrutiny, whistleblowers, ensuring the integrity of the electoral process, and countering undue influence. These measures can include:

   a. Establishing effective mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting corruption in municipal governance, such as an independent anticorruption agency or task force. This can help ensure that candidates are evaluated based on their qualifications and merit, rather than their ability to engage in corrupt practices.

   b. Increasing scrutiny of municipal governance through independent oversight and monitoring, such as through citizen-led initiatives, independent audits, and media reporting. This can help ensure transparency and accountability in municipal decision-making and reduce the potential for discriminatory practices that may negatively impact women's participation.

   c. Protecting and supporting whistleblowers who report corruption or other unethical practices in municipal governance. This can be achieved through the establishment of independent channels for reporting, legal protections for whistleblowers, and support mechanisms to ensure their safety and well-being.

   d. Ensuring the integrity of the electoral process by implementing transparent and fair electoral procedures, including impartial voter registration, independent election administration, and adequate security measures to prevent fraud and manipulation.

   e. Countering undue influence in municipal decision-making through measures such as conflict of interest regulations, transparency in lobbying activities, and public disclosure of political financing. These measures can help ensure that elected officials are held accountable to the public interest, rather than to powerful interest groups or individuals.

   The promotion of democracy and accountability may help restore an overarching sense of citizenship by shifting the power from the tribal familial systems to the State. When people feel that they are able to hold politicians accountable, their relationship with the State strengthens.

As the municipality elections draw near, it is crucial to engage in discussions that shed light on the persistent challenges faced by vulnerable groups, particularly women, and to strategize on the way forward. Convening dialogues of this nature serves as a valuable approach to assessing and reassessing the current landscape, while soliciting diverse viewpoints that facilitate situating our cause within a broader context.