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The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System

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ABSTRACT
This article examines women's political empowerment programs that focus on enabling women to run for office. Using the case of Lebanon, the article presents empirical insights highlighting a mismatch between what these programs offer and what women perceive to be the real challenges they face. The article makes a threefold contribution. First, it expands the critiques of women's political empowerment to include programs focused on helping women run for elections; second, it aims at applying feminist institutionalism to ethno-nationalist power-sharing systems; and third, it highlights the intersection of formal and informal institutional challenges by bringing empirical insights from Lebanese women.

KEYWORDS
Women; political participation; empowerment; elections; representation; Lebanon

Introduction[1]

The role of Arab women in public life has captured the attention of both scholars and policymakers for decades. The 2011 Arab uprisings showed the active role that women play in social movements across the region. But whether exacerbated by the impositions of nongovernmental organization (NGO-ization) or by state feminism, women undeniably remain grossly underrepresented in national politics in all Arab countries. Existing literature has attributed this underrepresentation to a number of reasons, including cultural factors, laws that discriminate against women, and noninclusive political processes (Norris and Inglehart 2001). In the development sector, numerous international organizations and United Nations (UN) agencies have adopted the paradigm of women's political empowerment to target individual women and build their capacity to run for office as a means to becoming better represented. Despite critiques that the women's empowerment approach is ill-suited to the context of the region, donors continue to promote and fund such programs (Jamal 2015).

This article utilizes the case of women's political empowerment programs in Lebanon to explain the mismatch between what these programs offer and

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what challenges women face in reality. Empirical insights from women who participated in such programs can go a long way in debunking the myth of this type of women's political empowerment. Contrary to the prevalent logic, programs on women's political empowerment may be disempowering for women and are failing to address the formal and informal institutional challenges that hinder the representation of women. I posit that focusing on these types of empowerment programs reveals a mismatch that has implications for theorizing about challenges to the representation of women in Lebanon and the Arab region. This article will answer the following question: what characterizes the mismatch between women's political empowerment programs and the real institutional challenges Lebanese women face in politics?

I explain that this mismatch can best be conceptualized by utilizing feminist institutionalism to analyze the impact of formal and informal institutions on women's representation. The main contribution this article seeks to make is threefold. First, it aims to expand the critiques of women's political empowerment to include programs focused on helping women run for elections; second, it aims to enhance our understanding of how feminist institutionalism can apply to ethno-nationalist power-sharing systems; and third, it highlights the intersection of formal and informal institutional challenges by bringing empirical insights from Lebanese women. By ethno-nationalist power-sharing, I refer to a system of government that is based on guaranteed representation of predetermined ethnic or nationalistic groups such as those in Northern Ireland or Belgium (Ruane and Todd 1996). In the case of Lebanon this power-sharing is an arrangement which guarantees the representation of 18 legally recognized sects, or religious confessions, through a formula that requires sectarian leaders to share power and authority. A growing literature now argues that gender has been ignored in studies on power-sharing which have focused solely on ethno-nationalist cleavages as the basis for representation (Ashe 2007).

Lebanon's political system being path dependent on sectarian power-sharing has long favored men over women in elections and political parties. Unlike countries such as Jordan, Morocco, and Libya where the introduction of a women's quota brought tens of women to national legislatures (Darhour and Dahlerup 2013), Lebanon has not adopted any measures to advance the representation of women in politics. In line with the arguments made by Byrne and McCulloch (2012), gender mainstreaming in Lebanon appears to be irreconcilable with a sectarian form of power-sharing. Although Lebanon was the only Arab country to hold frequent elections and to have passed female suffrage in 1953, a mere 17 women have ever been elected to parliament. All of those who have been elected were either wives, widows, or daughters of male politicians. Compared to other countries in the region, Lebanon ranks as one of the lowest in terms of women's representation in

parliament, with only Oman, Kuwait, and Yemen having fewer women members of parliament.

This conundrum of the underrepresentation of women in Lebanese politics prompted a wide range of international donor agencies to support programs with the purpose of training women to run for office. This article is intended to place the case of Lebanon in a broader comparative perspective within the burgeoning field of feminist institutionalism research by critiquing these programs and showing that they do not account for the challenges of power-sharing institutions. The case of Lebanon reveals how sectarian power-sharing can create institutional set-ups that are inaccessible and unfeasible for women to be represented. These findings can feed into a long-standing critique of women's empowerment programs, led by Hasso (2009) among others, by showcasing the futility of the logics driving these programs specifically in sectarian power-sharing institutions. This work also contributes to a larger debate about political systems in the Middle East where the Lebanese model of power-sharing is cited as a positive example without recognizing the deeply discriminatory role of sectarianism in hindering the representation of women. The Lebanese model according to Rosiny (2013) provides an example of coexistence that Syria can learn from. Recent political analysis by Salloukh (2015) contends that the Lebanese model may be successfully applied to end conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and Libya. Highlighting this gendered approach of feminist institutionalism may caution against adopting a sectarian power-sharing system that could make the representation of women very challenging, even after several decades as in the case of Lebanon.

My main tool of data collection has been focus group interviews with a sample of 45 women who are politically active and who participated in programs on women's political empowerment. They were selected by using purposeful sampling based on the criteria that the women were active in public life or were members in political parties, all of whom had participated directly in programs to train them to run for office. I also selected a sample of eight such programs which offered capacity-building workshops or trainings for women to learn to run for political office. A review of secondary data on such programs as well as of existing modules and content was conducted. Finally, results from interviews and content analysis of the programs were triangulated with data from biographical interviews with 27 women who have tried to run for political office or access high-level positions in political parties. The women selected for biographical interviews were those who were identified as having a leading role in their parties or in major campaigns for women's rights. The main findings from this research is that women's political empowerment programs in Lebanon have only served to encourage women to participate without trying to make institutions more accessible to

women. Women's political empowerment programs are futile in the face of formal and informal institutions of sectarian power-sharing.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section clarifies the conceptual terrain of feminist institutionalism and presents three institutional pillars of sectarian power-sharing. The second section foregrounds the voices of women who were interviewed by highlighting three main categories of challenges they face, namely, challenges of access, feasibility, and patriarchy. The third section explains the results of the analysis of a sample of eight women's political empowerment programs by using insights from focus groups to identify the main logics used in these programs. The final section presents a conclusion about what evidence from this case study means for future research and offers policy recommendations to guard against the futility of such political empowerment programs.

A feminist conceptualization of the institutions of sectarian power-sharing

Historical institutionalism and feminist institutionalism are helpful in conceptualizing both formal and informal institutions. Three institutional pillars of sectarian power-sharing, discussed below, have historically relied on informal institutions for deal-making and unwritten agreements among male leaders. This has enshrined a political culture of reliance on the male leader as the protector of the sect. Historical institutionalism, as a paradigm for studying political outcomes, focuses on the formal and informal institutions that produce and reproduce certain decisions, norms, and practices (Pierson and Skocpol 2003). Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth (1992), for example, highlight how institutions permit and exacerbate various asymmetries of power. While gender has increasingly been used as a paradigm for analyzing institutional power dynamics (Lovenduski and Norris 1993), the role of women in a power-sharing system that is based on the accommodation of male elite remains under-theorized.

As an emerging strand of institutionalism, feminist institutionalism has critiqued the gender blindness of historical institutionalism, positing that there is a need to apply a gender lens in order to better understand both the formal and informal institutions which control women's political careers. Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010) argue that "a major point of commonality between feminist approaches to institutionalism and new institutionalism is the focus on both formal and informal institutions, and their interplay. The key difference is the feminist contention that these are gendered" (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 580). Bjarnegård and Kenny (2016) explain male political dominance and women's continued underrepresentation as a result of the interaction of formal and informal rules taking place at the level of the political party, which in turn acts as a gatekeeper for

candidate selection. Krook (2010) argues that feminist insights enrich and inform institutionalist analysis by introducing gender as an analytic category in analyzing institutional power dynamics.

Political parties create the mechanism and context that are meant to push forward candidates for elections. Moser (2001) contends that "the study of institutions must be grounded in the social and political context in which they operate. This is not to say that electoral systems or institutions in general have no effect on political outcomes. But institutions have different effects under different conditions and cannot be seen as means to a particular end that can be applied to any context" (367). Historical decisions made at certain critical junctures influence the choice of parties and generate increasing returns by means of favoring men over women in high-level political positions. Krook and Mackay (2010) argue that the study of women in politics benefits greatly from adopting institutional conceptions to uncover the multiple ways that institutional practices construct gender power relations and inequalities.

In this article I position the case of Lebanon within the strand of feminist institutionalism that focuses on context as well as on the formal and informal rules in electoral and party politics. Political parties in Lebanon exhibit highly centralized informal practices focused on the male leader of the sect. Parties also lack entirely any adherence to formal rules and practices. A recent study showed that political parties do have internal bylaws, but none of them apply these bylaws; instead, all decisions are in the hands of the leader and his trusted group of selected advisors (Geha 2013). As such, political parties contribute to a context that is male dominated and does not allow women to pursue fair opportunities to be nominated for political office. Understanding how parties and national institutions propagate male dominance in politics helps expand the critiques of women's political empowerment programs from Lebanon to other Arab countries where institutions are built around the role of the male leader. Literature on women's representation shows that more often than not the formal rules do not discriminate against women, but informal practices favor men as electoral candidates. The pillars of power-sharing in Lebanon display an intersection of both formal and informal institutional challenges to the representation of women.

This intersection of both the formal and informal pushes the existing critiques of women's political empowerment beyond the three broad categories it currently focuses. According to the first of these critiques, posited by Abu-Lughod (2006), donor-funded women empowerment discourses are reductive because they leave out the cultural context of targeted Arab countries. Second, scholars like Jamal (2012) have argued that women's political empowerment programs are selective of a certain class of women and of certain NGOs which follow the required donor structures of operation and reporting. Third, political empowerment programs have been critiqued

by Tadros (2010) for approaching women as individuals and not as a collective, thereby jeopardizing empowerment by isolating women from a broader social and political experience. With the exception of some work by Joseph (1993), on the citizenship status of women, and Mikdashi (2014), on the gender bias of sectarianism, the impact of sectarian power-sharing institutions on women's representation is largely lacking. To expand the critiques on women's empowerment, three core institutional pillars of a sectarian form of power-sharing system must be considered.

These three pillars exhibit continuity from the origins of the Lebanese nation state under the Ottoman millet system. Power-sharing in Lebanon is a system of governance where recognition of the individual citizen is predicated upon their sectarian identity. Sectarianism, or confessionalism, is a quota system in which political, judicial, and administrative power is distributed among religious groups who are represented by elites who agree to share power (Makdisi 2000). Although Lebanon endured various junctures including a civil war, the power-sharing formula requiring that sects constitute the basis for representation remained largely the same, with changes only to the quotas distributed among Christians and Muslims. The Lebanese Civil War, that lasted 15 years, ushered in an amnesty law whereby former wartime militia leaders morphed into politicians and Members of Parliament.

The first institutional pillar is the role of the male political leader who also represents his sectarian community, known as the *za'im* (pl. *zu'ama*). The *za'im* is the spokesperson, deal-broker, and decision-maker on behalf of an entire sectarian community. Although political parties do exist in Lebanon, they are of a homogenous sectarian membership basis and are headed by a *za'im* who is usually not an official statesman (El Khazen 2003). This unelected and self-proclaimed position as a *za'im* allows him to enjoy access over state resources through an amnesty law following the end of the civil war in 1990. This position supersedes party structure and overrides the will of party supporters, making the *za'im* the sole decider on candidate selection. The role of the individual leader also supersedes the role of formal state institutions in that he is the main decision-maker when it comes to national policy, conducting deliberations, and deal-making outside the institutions of the state. The *zu'ama*, mostly former warlords, have created para-public, informal, and unconstitutional mechanisms of resolving tensions in what is known as the Dialogue Table (*tawlet el hiwar*), which brings together around 14 male leaders to develop a consensus on key national issues. As a result, Parliament as an institution is ineffective and executive institutions are weak at best and irrelevant at worst. Parliament operates like a private club where *zu'ama* use intimidation and vote buying to secure the election of their lists (Zahar 2005).

The second pillar is the clientelistic and uncompetitive nature of the electoral system in Lebanon that favors men with or control over financial

resources who run for office. Feminist institutionalist theorists have long analyzed the role of elections in advancing the representation of women. Not only are Lebanese men more exposed and connected to their communities they are also the ones with ties to foreign states that act as patrons to their parties. Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni party while Iran supports the Shiite party, and the Christian parties have historically been supported by France and the United States. Women are nowhere near these axes of power and male *zu'ama* act as country representatives with foreign counterparts. Moreover, a powerful web of clientelistic relations secures votes by buying the loyalty of citizens with goods and services long before, and long after, elections take place. Men manage and organize this web of clientelism by appointing local level *zu'ama* at the grassroots and municipal level to confer goods and favors to citizens.

The 2009 parliamentary election had one of the highest recorded bribes per vote, and only four women, out of 128 total seats, were elected to parliament. Using survey data, Corstange (2012) asserts that more than half of the voters admitted to selling their votes in the 2009 election. While the electoral law includes an article on campaign finance, it legalizes spending as long as there is evidence that such spending had taken place three years before the elections. Male sectarian leaders finance sectarian charitable organizations which have existed for decades (Cammett 2014). In the parliamentary elections in 2018 women made up 14% of candidates compared to only 3% in 2009. Historically, Lebanon has had a majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system, but in 2018 Lebanon implemented the first proportional system with a preferential vote. Analysis of the dimensions of this new law, namely, districting and the threshold for list eligibility, suggests that it was designed to enhance the chances of candidates within the main political alliances and to maintain a status quo of representation of candidates nominated by political *zu'ama*. Politicians and political parties added more women into their lists in 2018, with the exception of the Shiite-armed party Hezbollah that stated parliamentary work as the domain of men. But even though more women were nominated, the share of women elected only rose from 3% to 5%. The preferential votes in 2018, as expected, went almost entirely to men who were heading the lists, and women were listed more as fillers than as real contestants (Najjar 2018). More women ran, but many more men spoke in the media and showed up at campaign rallies to secure their preferential votes from supporters. This is mainly due to the existence of what Bjarnegård (2013) refers to as homosocial networks and homosocial political capital—a kind of capital that is reserved only for men who can access it gain votes in an election. Lebanese women were encouraged to run in 2018 but without the networks, access, and capital that men enjoyed, they were not visible in the media and had less chances to be known to voters.

Elections, even under a proportional system, did not create major opportunities for change in representation but were instead used to secure seats for sectarian leaders and their supporters. The parliamentary elections in 2018 more or less brought back the same faces and names in a male-dominated parliament. The continuity of a sectarian quota guaranteeing parity between Muslims and Christians in the parliament is conducive to a culture where the men are the saviors and guarantors of sect-based representation. Voting takes place based on one's ancestral origin, and women can either be registered under their father or their husbands' ancestral origins, regardless of their place of residence. Women's ability to choose freely in an election is circumvented by being forced to move personal records rather than being able to vote where they reside.

The third institutional pillar is that of religious courts, which, in the absence of a unified civil status code, discriminate against women's right to have a voice over their own life decisions. Women are systematically discriminated against by the Lebanese legal system, which grants them fewer rights than male Lebanese citizens. Women are also treated differently under different personal status laws when it comes to divorce, custody, and inheritance. The legal framework exhibits discrimination that favors men in all aspects—for example in areas such as custody and inheritance—but also discriminates against women based on their sect. For example, child marriage laws differ on the basis of each religious court, with some courts allowing marriage as early as nine years old. The absence of a civil status law means that religious courts regulate all aspects of the personal lives of women based on religious codes open to interpretation. The 15 personal status laws allow husbands to subjugate and deprive their wives of their children as early as the age of two (Shehadeh 1998). This dyadic relationship between religion, courts, and legislation perpetuates institutions based on the male dominance of women since they are born. Divorce laws in Islamic courts legally allow men to discipline and have unconsented intercourse with their wives, while under Maronite courts women have no legal right to file for divorce.

Lebanon passed the Law for the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence in 2014, yet the law does not protect against marital rape and other types of physical abuse. The law also states that in case of conflict between the new law and traditional personal status laws, the laws under religious courts will still take priority. Marital rape is ruled out of the provisions on the basis that it is the wife's obligation as mandated in the marriage contract. Until recently, rapists in Lebanon had the option of marrying their victims to avoid prosecution. Women do not even have control over their own bodies, and a woman who gets an abortion may be imprisoned for up to three years. Women cannot pass nationality on to their children, and so children are automatically assigned to the sect of their father (Jaulin 2014). Since a woman cannot pass on her nationality, if she is

married to a foreigner, her children cannot benefit from the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and receive no health care services from the state. Additionally, until 1994 women were not allowed to own and operate businesses without the formal permissions and formal supervision of their male kin.

The above section presents a feminist conceptualization of sectarian power-sharing in Lebanon. Within this conceptual framework, a set of intertwined formal and informal institutions maintains the sect as the basis of recognition from the state and maintains the man as the head of the sect—both in politics and religious courts. According to Waylen (2014), "It is increasingly recognized that not only are the formal aspects—the formal 'rules of the game' and their enforcement—crucial but the informal aspects of institutions—the norms, rules, and practices—often less visible or even passing unnoticed or taken for granted by actors inside and outside of those institutions, are also central" (213). In the absence of a quota for women, the Lebanese case is a quandary for understanding how formal and informal institutions intersect to create increasing institutional returns that favor men over women in politics. This theoretical section positions this case in the literature on feminist institutionalism as a case of intersecting, formal and informal, institutional pillars that discriminate against women.

Women voice their real challenges

This section presents findings from 27 biographical interviews with Lebanese women who have experiences in political parties and electoral campaigns. The institutional challenges based on interview data were grouped into three main categories emanating from how formal and informal institutions of sectarian power-sharing operate in the political lives of these women. The data on which this analysis is based point to a number of informal rules that coexist within and intersect with formal political institutions in Lebanon. Participants in the biographical interviews revealed three major types of challenges that I refer to as the "real challenges."

The challenge of access: spaces and structures of decision-making

When reflecting on their experiences, interview participants identified the spaces and structures of decision-making as one of the main challenges they faced. Evidence here shows how the role of male *zu'ama* and of male dominance reinforces the nature of homosocial networks and political capital. Answers about access fit into two main subcategories, namely, challenges to women's access to the physical location of decision-making and to people, mostly men, with influence. A consensus among all those interviewed, for example, was that late night meetings are challenging for

women. In some cases it may be physically more harmful for a woman than for a man to have to commute back home after a late meeting.[2] In most cases, women have more household or family duties that they need to attend to in the evenings. One parliamentary candidate explained, "the guys like to meet after 1pm or 11pm, they all smoke and talk a lot. I just stopped attending meetings."[3] Another activist reflected that "I am simply unable to make it to the meetings where (electoral) lists are agreed on. Those meetings happen after midnight and behind closed doors, there is no way for me even to be there."[4]

Even female activists running for seats at their university student elections shared this sentiment: "I often had to stay out until 1am because that's how long they stayed. And I had to fight with my parents, and take a taxi or sleep at a friend's house. But I simply could not leave otherwise no one will ask for my opinion or respect the fact that I should be taken into account. So I had to be physically present."[5] Sexual harassment was also reported as a main challenge in addition to attitudes of benevolent sexism, which paint women as too nice to be politicians in Lebanon. Following years of lobbying for a parliamentary quota for women, one leading politician told an NGO representative "find me one pretty woman wanting to run for office and I will personally nominate her on my list."[6] One woman explained that "even when I am assertive, I am usually called by names like 'pretty' or 'darling' in the most serious of settings."[7] Men also have greater access to other men. Research respondents stated that a man could, at any time, walk up to another man and request to meet him outside of work, but a woman could never do that.

Physical access to the media is also a challenge, with a predominantly masculine image of politicians as the norm on television talk shows. Men are hosted as experts, analysts, and electoral candidates, while women are mainly the presenters or the singers. Television and radio frequencies were distributed among the main political leaders after the civil war, several of which are owned by wartime militias headed by men. One illustrative quote by a television reporter was that "men are always more eager, ready, and available to go on TV, while women will need more time to prepare and seek approvals in their parties. This is why you see more men, and the same men on TV."[8]

The second challenge of access was that of access to the decision-makers themselves. One political party representative explained, "Election candidates are selected by the *za'im* himself, I cannot just walk up to him and nominate myself."[9] Another issue that most interview participants agreed on is that the centers of decision-making are not even within their own party structures. "Decisions are made in Tehran and Riyadh, how will I ever be invited to those meetings? I never get invited, I just sit and wait to hear from the leaders who do get invited," explained one interviewee.[10]

The challenge of feasibility: financial, legal, and social (non)feasibility

Female research participants repeatedly stated that having a political career for them was not feasible and that it was a more realistic choice for men. Evidence here shows how the uncompetitive and clientelistic nature of elections in Lebanon poses a constraint to the opportunity of women to run for office. "The only way to run for parliament is to be a parliamentarian who is well known, and all well-known parliamentarians are men," explained one respondent.[11] When asked what they meant by challenges of feasibility, the participants' answers fell into three main categories. The first set of answers focused on the norms of political ascendency in Lebanon. Lebanon has political parties but no proper party system, structured mechanisms, or bylaws for engagement. Parties are headed by sectarian leaders who use appointments or nominations for electoral candidates to promote their loyalists. As a rule of thumb, those who wish to ascend to powerful positions will end up paying the party leader to get on a list (Corstange 2012). Women who are already far from decision-making spheres will hardly ever be asked to rise up in the party ranks. "There are too many men who would have to step aside for me to become important in my party, it is simply unimaginable that that would happen," explained one women who has served in her party for more than two decades.[12] In Lebanon, party leadership is often passed on from father to son or son-in-law. As a result, men are often lined up to become parliamentary candidates or ministers way before women. Women who do aspire to fill high-ranking positions have to face internal pressures and stand up to a predominantly male environment. "I was verbally sexually harassed for many months before my husband actually asked me to quit the party. I love politics and I resent having had to leave, but it was not feasible for me to stay," explained one ex-party member.[13] Most recently, some political parties initiated women's committees or branches within the parties but these branches have made it even less feasible for women to reach senior positions. "By restricting women's role to women branches, parties appear symbolically to be supportive of women but in reality are sidelining them to marginal roles," explained one former party member.[14]

The second category of responses regarding feasibility was about women not being able to obtain enough support from both their own families and constituencies who would much rather see a man in a political position. "My husband is supportive, of course, and this allows me to be active in the party, but no way that I would be able to run. Even with all his loving support, for which I am grateful, my husband does 10% of what I do at home," explained one participant.[15] All of the candidates to municipal or parliamentary elections we interviewed stated that their families were the first to ask them to quit the race. "As long as there is a man in the family, women and especially young women are asked to step aside and give priority to that man,"

explained one municipal candidate.[16] Families with a long lineage of politicians or local leaders will tend to place expectations for continuing their legacy on the men. In instances where men were unable, or unavailable, the wives or sisters of male leaders took over and then passed on the political role to their male children once they came of age.

The third type of explanation women gave about feasibility focused on the lives and careers of women. The clientelistic nature of Lebanese elections requires women to make considerable financial and time commitments. Members of parliament spend most of their time fostering ties with their voters by attending local events, hosting religious ceremonies, and covering the cost of basic services (Hamzeh 2001). Women in Lebanon earn less than their male counterparts and take on much more responsibilities in the household. "When I started out in the party I did not have any children but now it is becoming impossible to manage. Of course my male colleagues have no problem leaving their families for days at a time, but if I behave the same way I would be judged by everyone," explained a senior party official.[17]

The challenge of patriarchy: masculinity and oppression

This set of responses from interview participants provided insights into how sectarian power-sharing imposes a challenge of patriarchal influence that manifests in masculinization of politics. This manifestation occurred as a result of both institutional and ideational influences over political life. Evidence here points to the influence of religious courts over the lives of women and how this affects women's role in public life. When asked what the participants meant by patriarchy, their responses fell into two categories. First, participants identified legal and cultural practices that restrict women's capacity to influence the institutions which shape national policies. Patriarchy embedded in sectarianism converges with women's political participation being contingent upon the support and approval of men, both in the private institutions of the household and in political institutions. "She is an annex to the father's or husband's family and political orientation, a number on the list of voters, she is not a political entity in and of herself," explained one female advisor to a Lebanese Member of Parliament.[18]

Institutionalized patriarchy within the sectarian system is supported by informal practices that keep women in lower-level political positions. "Any one of my male colleagues feels free to act warm and friendly with the Director General here at the Ministry, whereas if I were to behave the same way, he would certainly get the wrong idea," explained one female senior civil servant.[19] This leads women to have to act more rigid than men in their institutions and to distance themselves from building alliances with other men. Institutional influences of patriarchy are also promulgated through the regulation of sexual relations in Lebanon, which are only legal

through a state-recognized marriage of a male and female. "By state recognized, we mean marriage that was conducted in one of the religious courts or abroad in another court but registered in Lebanon, since Lebanese cannot get married in a civil court in their own country," explained a female human rights lawyer.[20] Weak state institutions and low-quality public services also mean that women need to secure benefits from sectarian and religiously backed charity foundations, which display strong patriarchal features, having names after male politicians and being led by sectarian leaders (Cammett and Issar 2010).

Patriarchy here also had a strong ideational influence. Participants posited that, since all religious leaders are men and all sectarian courts are headed by men, women's preferences and interests were rarely taken into account. Women could lose custody of children as young as the age of three or four, and religious courts could send them to jail if they contested the decisions made by male leaders. Such decisions are all made by religious rulings led by men. Religion, in the eyes of focus group participants, favors men as the saviors and protectors of society. Sectarian leaders endorse political appointments, speak on behalf of their constituency, and interfere in policy discussions around gender, including child marriage, marital rape, and LGBTQ rights. It is often the case that parliamentary candidates would go to the Mufti or Patriarch for support. Historically, the Maronite Patriarch and Sunni Mufti both played a significant role in brokering electoral deals, sealing off political agreements, and providing their blessing over the formation of governments (McCallum 2012). The ideational influence of patriarchy also emerges in women's low levels of trust in the prospects of change. Research participants repeatedly stated that despite some progress in modernizing some institutions, Lebanese women will continue to be treated unfairly because the system is inherently discriminatory. "As long as recognition and participation is based on sect, men will continue to be favored by the system at all levels," a female judge explained.[21]

The theories of women's political empowerment

Empowerment implies a process of granting more power and authority to a person or group of persons to allow them greater control over their own lives and environment. The advent of the language of women's empowerment to developing countries can be traced back mostly to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing where "state actors, and governments anxious to demonstrate a progressive approach to gender quickly adopted the catchphrase of women's empowerment" (Cornwall and Eade 2010, 113). This type of UN conference on women redefined the arena of women's rights from the national to the international sphere (Abu-Lughod, 2009). In Lebanon the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW)

was established in 1992 with a consultative mandate to promote women's rights and gender equity in government policies and institutions. But the bulk of the efforts aimed at women's political empowerment in Lebanon intensified after the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. After 2005, donors began pushing forward women's issues as part of an agenda of democracy promotion in the Middle East and invigorated the creation and funding of several NGOs working on gender equality.

This section analyzes the logics of women's political empowerment programs by analyzing a sample of eight programs which focused on helping women run for elections. These programs are all funded by foreign non-Lebanese donors, target women specifically, are implemented by local NGOs, and use the format of workshops or trainings. Although NGOs would presumably exhibit better knowledge of political institutions in the Lebanese context, this was not the case in Lebanon. Instead, NGOs have seemingly implemented these programs with little regard to the institutional context of elections and party politics in Lebanon. This disconnect between NGOs and political life in Lebanon is beyond the scope of this article but, suffice it to say, NGOs were not influential in the design and implementation of such programs. Rather, they acted as mere implementers of donor strategies (Geha 2016).

To avoid any conflict of interest by exposing the opinions of specific participants who attended workshops funded by certain donors, I opted for confidentiality of all those who took part in the workshops and have coded the titles of the programs so as not to harm the reputation of specific organizations included in this study. The material reviewed in this section has included publically available content and literature.

Empirical insights from participants in these programs were taken from focus group data with a sample of 45 women. The focus group protocol tapped into questions about their motivations for joining women's political empowerment programs, their views on the relevance of these programs, and their perspectives on the impact that such workshops could achieve. Focus groups were recorded via note-taking, responses were analyzed, and three major themes were identified. This article adopted a content analysis approach and has derived categories from the data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Code and Title	Target Group	Year
P1: Women and Local Governance	Women municipal election candidates	2010
P2: Women's Political Participation	Women in political parties	2012
P3: Women in the Media	Women activists	2013
P4: Women's Political Empowerment	Women activists and independents	2013
P5: Lobbying Skills	Women in political parties	2016
P6: Women as Pioneers	Women municipal activists	2017
P7: Women's Political Participation	NGO staff	2017
P8: Women's Electoral Campaigning	Women parliamentary candidates	2017

The logic of knowledge provision

Women's political empowerment programs are driven primarily by the logic that women do not know how to participate effectively and be represented in politics. The main theory is that women are less informed than men of their rights to participate and, as such, are underrepresented. Donors work with local specialized NGOs or consultants to provide Lebanese women with basic knowledge of the local electoral law, international statutes, and entry points to campaigning. "They keep preaching to us things we already know. I like the trainers and I appreciate the good efforts, but we know all this (information) and we have heard it a million times," explained one participant.[22] Manuals use experiences from other countries to show that women can learn to become effective political actors. "These NGO trainers think that this must be Sweden, and that if we go to our party we can lobby internally and build alliances for women candidates. The truth is that candidates are selected by the *za'im*. We learned great lobbying tools that have nothing to do with our parties. But if you take me to Sweden, I guarantee you I would make an excellent candidate."[23]

The fact that women are the target audience for these workshops underscores that donors believe that men already know how to be represented. "My father thinks that it is great for me to attend these things, but that the language and definitions I learned do not really apply to campaigning in our village," explained one participant.[24] Most training manuals and workshops start by telling participants in terms of numbers and percentages how underrepresented women have been in Lebanese political institutions. Many workshops showcase the comparison of how other countries have successfully enacted women's quotas and how Lebanese women lag behind. None of the manuals or workshops analyzed for this article identify the structural obstacles that women face, but instead employ a largely normative approach and use a language of encouraging women to learn about their rights.

The assumption that Lebanese women do not know their rights, are not aware of the laws, and do not understand the importance of their role in politics is also reflected in the format of these workshops. Women who are selected for the programs have to sit in a room for eight hours a day for anything between one day and five days while a certified trainer, whether local or foreign, explains to them what gender means, how public policy is designed, and how they can advocate for their rights. The knowledge provided focuses on how to approach formal institutions within a political system such as the parliament, but this is often far from the reality of how power-sharing politics operate, which is in reality based mostly on consensus among a handful of *zu'ama*. "I was trained to think that I need to come up with a policy project and present it to the head of the party and then he will

notice me and see that I am competent. And this frankly is ridiculous. Elections here are not about policy issues," explained one participant.[25]

The problem with the logic of focusing on passing along knowledge to women is the assumption that donors and local specialized NGOs know what kind of knowledge is essential to relay. For example, there is an utter dismissal of the interaction between the public and private spheres from such training programs. "I am a lawyer and I know well my rights under the constitution. I also know that we need more women in politics. But there is no way I can run for office with two kids at home," explained one participant.[26] None of the training manuals address the burdens of family life and the division of labor in Lebanese households. "Even as an unmarried women, I need my father's approval and my entire family's endorsement to run for the local municipality, and nobody can really teach you how to do this," explained one participant.[27] In summary, the logic of knowledge provision presumes that there is a type of knowledge that women lack, areas of knowledge can be predetermined by a specialist, and if only women knew better, they could be better represented.

The logic of fair competition

Women's political empowerment programs are also based on the theory that there is a free and fair electoral competition that both women and men can participate in. This logic also presumes that the rules for competition are well known in advance for both men and women alike. The presumption is that women are underrepresented because they are not competing with men. Training modules are blind to the structural inequalities and to the fact that in Lebanon there is no clear formal process for political competition. In fact, in most districts electoral competition is nonexistent with lists led by *zu'ama* winning sweeping majorities. Districting is done to ensure that a majority of sectarian communities are within one district, and this ensures block voting for a list headed by the major sectarian *za'im* (Geha 2016). The 2018 proportional law redistricted to allow for preferential votes to go for the *za'im* of each area and succeeded in securing the election of a parliament where 95% of its members are men.

Programs targeting women in political parties specifically focus on the need to nominate more women without giving women more voice. One trainer stated that "there is no difference between a man and a woman from this party, so why don't more women come forward as candidates in the next elections?"[28] The most repeated sentiment here is that there is a fair electoral process which women can compete in. Several training modules link women's representation to a discourse on democracy indicating that women should strive to be more represented as part of their civic rights and responsibilities. "In Lebanon we always know the election results in advance,

there is no real competition. Even if we wanted to run we would not be noticed, it is not like this is a democracy," explained one participant.[29]

The assumption here is that women have gone unnoticed in their political milieu. It is almost presumed that the dominance of men is a coincidence. "We are told that the *za'im* does not mean to nominate men, but it is just that men are more active on the ground. But I know for a fact that we women work harder inside and outside the house," explained one participant.[30] This logic also disregards the private sphere where women continue to do more than their husbands: "I have a supportive husband but when I come home late he still asks me whether I think dinner is going to prepare itself," explained one participant.[31] Here training manuals use testimonials or pictures of famous women political figures regardless if the comparison is meaningful. "Germany has Angela Merkel and America has Hilary Clinton, Lebanon can one day have a woman president. This is what foreigners tell us," explained one participant.[32]

The logic of fair competition, in addition to being utterly normative, places the blame entirely on women and does not consider the noncompetitive institutional characteristics that keep the same men in power. A quick look at "the name of presidents, prime ministers, deputies, supreme court justices, ministers and most class 'A' civil servants would confirm that the same family names recur almost uninterruptedly for the last two centuries" (Ziadeh 2006, 146). Women, on the other hand, are at fault for not believing that they can compete with men. The rules governing electoral and political power are not competitive and inaccessible even to men from outside certain spheres, and women are systematically left out of these institutions.

The logic of capacity-building

This logic assumes that even if Lebanese women want to be represented in political office, they lack capacity and need to be trained to do so. Training manuals are full of the language of capacity-building and capacity development. The theory of capacity also dictates that women need to master a specific and proven skill set that enables them to convince allies and voters of their competence. "They keep training us on skills to develop public policies but there is no clear policy process in Lebanon to begin with," explained one participant.[33] Those skills, embedded in international experiences, are imposed onto the Lebanese context and become the basis for competencies that trainees need to acquire.

Competence is considered to be a main requirement for women to enter politics. Political parties have specialized offices and committees for building the capacity of women. Trainers and consultants work with these committees to enable women to run for office. "It is not that our *za'im* is against women, on the contrary we are so liberal, but it is just that there are not enough

competent women that we can nominate," explained one participant.[34] "We live in a country where men have messed up waste management and we literally drink and breathe garbage, but when it comes to politics, they seem to want only a competent woman but nobody minds an incompetent man," explained one independent activist.[35] Training programs have focused on women as needing certain capacities to enable them to get to the same level as their male counterparts.

The main problem of the logic of capacity is that skills like advocacy, public speaking, policy-making are requirements for women. "We keep getting told that if we get certified in specific issues, like message design and stakeholder analysis, we would be doing a better job in our organizations, but politics in Lebanon is not based on these skills," explained one participant.[36] The programs fail to focus on a skill set that is suitable to the context of informal politics and of power-sharing agreements. This logic presumes that women lack capacity and skills, when in fact those skills are often distinct from how political deals and party nominations are actually made in Lebanon.

Conclusion: understanding the myth and the mismatch

The principal burden of this article was to debunk the myth of women's political empowerment in the Lebanese context. By utilizing feminist institutionalism, this research has shown how three core pillars of sectarian power-sharing institutionalize, both formally and informally, systemic impediments to the representation of women. 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. By focusing the blame on women themselves, these programs are passing on largely inapplicable knowledge and skills. Women's political empowerment, especially in the forms of training programs, is not suitable to address the formal and informal institutional challenges of sectarian power-sharing.

This article expands our understanding of three areas of growing scholarship. First, it adds to the existing critiques of donor-funded women's political empowerment programs by showing empirical insights of how these programs play out in a sectarian power-sharing system. Power-sharing weakens national institutions and makes political parties, as well as parliaments, subservient to the whims of former warlords or financiers, as is the case in Lebanon. This culture of informality, secrecy, and vote-buying renders political competition almost nonexistent. Politics is done by consensus among a handful of men while women are physically kept out of these spheres, thereby maintaining asymmetries of power within political institutions.

Women's political empowerment programs that focus on providing women with skills to advocate for themselves as electoral candidates are misplaced efforts.

Second, this article makes a contribution to the application of feminist institutionalism to sectarian power-sharing systems. Existing literature by feminist institutionalists has highlighted a wealth of conceptual frameworks identifying asymmetries of power and ways of conceptualizing gender relations within political institutions. Good institutionalists, according to Krook and Mackay (2010), should make sure to gender institutionalism. By the same token, this case study shows that good feminist institutionalists should make sure to address gender power-sharing systems. A growing field of study is promoting the Lebanese political system as a model to countries including Syria and Yemen, and policy-makers should consider a feminist conceptualization of power-sharing. The case of Lebanon has shown that the intersection of formal and informal institutions of power-sharing can create insurmountable obstacles to women's political representation.

Lastly, this article has sought to bring the voices and experiences of women into emerging scholarship on the Middle East and on women's role in politics. Empirical evidence shows that women themselves are critiquing empowerment programs in the region. Interviews and focus groups have provided a foundation for us to begin to identify the daily struggles of being a woman in Lebanese politics. From being ostracized by family to not being able to attend late night meetings to more grave concerns like losing custody of their children, women within current Lebanese political institutions do not stand a chance to be truly represented.

To overcome the myth explored here, this research invites scholars and practitioners to revisit how women are encouraged to enter politics. The case of Lebanon can be instructive to other countries struggling with informal institutions, a weak state, clientelism, and a uncompetitive electoral framework. As a tool, women's political empowerment programs in Lebanon have only served to encourage women to participate without trying to make institutions more accessible to women. The normativity in women's political empowerment programs clashes with the realization that sectarian power-sharing remains resistant to women in both its formal and informal institutional pillars. Similar programs that seek to empower women not only across Arab countries, specifically Iraq and Jordan, but also in countries with power-sharing systems, such as Burundi and Northern Ireland, should consider the institutional and political barriers to women's entry into politics.

Participants in this study have spoken their piece; it is time for academics and practitioners to catch up. I contend that this "catching up" can be done by politicizing the plight for women's representation in Lebanon and elsewhere. In terms of policy recommendations, this study has shown that programs which train women without reforming the political context and

institutions are futile. These findings apply to other contexts where male political elite dominate the public sphere and centralize decision-making within political parties. Women's political empowerment will fail anywhere that men are designing electoral laws to advance their interests and representation—and more so in countries governed by sectarian or ethnic forms of power-sharing. Future policies and programs need to recognize the intersection of the formal and informal by reforming political party structures, the electoral law, and the personal status laws to allow women a chance to compete against men. Future policy-making that seeks to empower women should work toward giving women greater agency over their personal lives and over their political careers. Had these programs been effective, Lebanese politicians would have stopped them a long time ago. Without holistic and structural changes, women's empowerment programs are networking opportunities at best and impediments to the meaningful participation of women at worst.

Notes

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3. Former parliamentary candidate, interview with author, Beirut, January 21, 2017.
4. Activist and founder of independent political movement, interview with author, Beirut, September 21, 2017.
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6. Spokesperson from Women in Front, interview with the author, Beirut, February 26, 2017.
7. Representative of Campaign for Women's Nationality Law, interview with author, Beirut, January 18, 2017.
8. Senior TV reporter, interview with author, Beirut, March 30, 2017.
9. Senior member of political party, interview with author, Beirut, September 3, 2017.
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16. Activist, interview with author, Beirut, November 12, 2016.
17. Activist, focus group, Beirut, February 19, 2017.
18. Member of political party, interview with author, Beirut, January 13, 2017.
19. Civil servant, interview with author, Beirut, December 10, 2017.

20. Representative from legal reform NGO, interview with author, Beirut, November 25, 2017.
21. Lebanese judge, interview with author, Beirut, March 23, 2017.
22. Head of women's branch in political party, focus group in Beirut, March 10, 2017.
23. Senior member of political party, interview with author, Beirut, September 3, 2017.
24. Former municipal elections candidate, focus group, Beirut, December 15, 2017.
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35. Activist, focus group, Beirut, September 22, 2017.
36. Feminist activist, focus group, Beirut, September 22, 2017.

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