

# Increasing Women's Political Participation in Lebanon: Reflections on Hurdles, Opportunities and Hope

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## Abstract

Lebanon stands out in the Middle East for its relative political openness, religious freedom, and the academic and professional achievements of Lebanese women. Yet, paradoxically, it has one of the lowest rates of women's political participation in the region. This paper is the result of an initiative undertaken by the Lebanese government in July 2012 to increase women's political participation. Through this initiative, sex-segregated workshops on women's political empowerment were held for male and female representatives of Lebanon's political parties. The goal was to start a productive conversation that would ultimately lead to progress from the 2012 status quo of women constituting only three percent of the National Parliament of Lebanon. In this paper, we will describe the process and content explored during the women's political empowerment workshops. Opportunities to affect change of the current level of women's participation will be highlighted and conclusions will be drawn to aid similar initiatives.

**Keywords:** political participation, women, gender studies, Lebanon

## 1. Introduction

The Arab world has hybrid political systems. Often they feature strong religious influences, sometimes even strong monarch regimes, along with parliamentary politics. Though the Arab Spring (2010) aimed to transform outmoded power structures to achieve greater equality among people and the equitable distribution of resources, numerous social, economic and political obstacles have impaired the realization of such transformational change. For instance, true change, especially in terms of gender sensitization and the equal representation of women in politics, remains a lofty goal consistently impeded in many Arab countries. One way to test progress resulting from the Arab Spring is to evaluate the success of programs working towards women's political empowerment, thereby measuring women's increased political participation in national elections as a gauge.

The focus of our study was an initiative undertaken by Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) Unit of Women's Affairs in July 2012 to increase women's political representation in government. Through this initiative, sex-segregated workshops on women's political empowerment were held for male and female representatives of Lebanon's political parties. The goal was to start a productive conversation that would ultimately lead to progress from the 2012 status quo of women constituting only three percent of the National Parliament of Lebanon.

Male and/or female representatives from 24 of 39 invited political parties participated. Workshops included a diverse representation of women and men from varied religious, cultural and political affiliations. In this paper, we will describe the process and content explored during the women's political empowerment workshops, including reflections from workshop moderators and participants. Opportunities to affect change of the current level of women's participation will be highlighted and conclusions will be drawn to aid similar initiatives.

## 2. Literature Review

It is well established that women are under-represented in politics. Globally, only one in five Parliamentarians is female, and there are 37 States in which women account for less than 10 percent of parliamentarians in single or

lower houses (Facts and Figures, 2015). According to the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation: "Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care, and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women." (A/RES/66/130). Status disadvantages within existing political systems such as absence of a functioning party system or backing by political parties, misogynist climate, predominately illiterate electorate, or lack of relevant networks further hamper women's ability to get elected to political office (Ballington & Matland, 2004). Based on research from twenty case studies of party activities to promote women's political empowerment, Ballington finds that in many countries women are discouraged from engaging in the public sphere [political sphere] and pursuing decision making roles that are in direct competition with men. Instead women are delegated to support roles within the private sphere such as housekeeping and family care (Ballington, 2011).

Despite numerous studies of political party initiatives to promote women's political participation in other countries, there is overall a lack of in-depth, qualitative research related to Lebanon's political party development, electoral processes, civic engagement, and issues of governance (Lebanon, 2015). Only preliminary research exists related to the role of women in Lebanese politics (Kingston, Saadeh, Helou, Abdelnour, Morrice, & Haheim, 2011). The literature from these initial studies is largely focused on exploring the root causes and barriers to gender equality and women's lack of representation in Lebanese politics from the country's historical, political and contextual frameworks. There have been no other published studies similar to the work presented in this paper.

Nevertheless, the arguments presented in the preliminary research related to Lebanese women and politics provides an important base for the work presented in this paper. Exploring the barriers to women's political representation in Lebanon, researchers found a profound correlation between women's low levels of political representation and the country's sectarian based system of politics (Kingston, Saadeh, Helou, 2011). Kingston argues that there are two structural aspects of Lebanon's political order that perpetuates gender inequality in political parties: the first is patriarchy and the second is path-dependency. Kingston explains that women's inability to move beyond the private sphere of home and family and into the public sphere of politics is a result of the gendered, patriarchal, and paternalistic nature of Lebanon's political order where all courts base their legal decisions on the dictate that the male is the head of the household (Kingston, 2011). Kingston uses Suad's definition of patriarchy within the Lebanese context as "the privileging of males and seniors and the legitimizing of the privileges in the morality and idiom of kinship" (Kingston, 2011; Suad, 1994). Second, Kingston argues that Lebanon's political order is path-dependent and is continuously reinforced by the country's consociation or confessionalism system of government in which political representation is proportionately divided among religious communities (Kingston, 2011). He asserts that the impact of these two structural aspects is a political order that perpetuates a male dominated, clan-based system of clientelism that not only discriminates against women but creates a sense of citizenship based on one's communal and religious identity as opposed to individual rights (Kingston, 2011). Saadeh argues that there is an inextricable link between women's discrimination and the "domination of religion and religious courts over personal affairs, including personal status laws" that deny Lebanese women equal status in all aspects of social, economic and political affairs (Saadeh, 2011). Helou highlights how political parties in Lebanon mirror the country's social characteristics of patriarchy. She states that most parties have a central father-type figure that is the leader of the party, and a familial-type loyalty that exists within the parties. Thus, political parties like the overall social system privileges males and discriminates against women (Helou, 2011).

## **Part 1- The Context: Political Structures, Gender Equality, and Women's Role in Politics in Lebanon.**

### *1.1 Overview*

Lebanon's history of conflict has resulted in a political arena that is shaped by compromise, resulting in the law of happy mediums. Even rivals drawn from different constituencies, often sectarian, have learned not to jeopardize civil peace or Lebanon's existence as a nation with polarizing politics. Ironically this compromised political stasis has resulted in a false sense of peace which is belied by the explosive potential of political dispersal, should the compromised position crumble. This fragile political environment, combined with restrictive societal norms and beliefs concerning women's gender roles, has resulted in a low percentage of women leaders entering the political arena or being recruited into politics. Though women have the right to vote and run for elections, as in many other places, a glass ceiling exists for women's political participation at every level of government (Zataari, 2005).

### *1.2 Political System*

Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic within an overall framework of confessionalism - a system of

government in which political power is proportionately divided between representatives from certain religious communities. In accordance with constitutional amendments included in the 1989 Taif Peace Accord to end Lebanon's 15-year civil war, each of Lebanon's 18 officially recognized religious sects are represented in parliament and in the ministries according to the size of their respective populations (Zataari, 2005)

Lebanon has numerous political parties; lists range from twenty-nine to over one hundred different political parties. The majority of political parties are based on sectarian interests. Similarly, political voting blocs are usually based on confessional and personal/family allegiance, familism, rather than on political affinities (Suad, 2011). Interestingly, this process of political familism, through which citizens use their family institutions and kinship ties to influence the state, and correspondingly the state uses the familial relationships to mobilize citizen support and implement state control, has been one of the major factors affecting the relationship between the state and citizens in Lebanon (Suad, 2011). In a country where one's surname can identify your religious affiliation, the family and kinship relationships are an intrinsic part of the Lebanese confessionalism political system.

### *1.3 Gender Equality*

Article 7 of Lebanon's Constitution states, "All Lebanese shall be equal before the law" and thereby guarantees equality to all citizens (Lebanon. Const. art, 7 § 2). However, Lebanon's laws are not immune from applications or interpretations which can discriminate against women and (re) produce disparities based upon gender (Mikdashi, 2010). For example, under the Lebanese Constitution and national law, all matters related to religious interests and personal status, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, domestic violence and inheritance are delegated to the jurisdiction of the country's 16 religious based Personal Status Codes and religious court systems (Mikdashi, 2010). These courts are subject neither to the larger dictates of Lebanese civil law, such as protection of individual rights, nor to the authority of international human rights treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ratified by the Lebanese government, with reservations, in 1996 (CEDAW/SP/2010/2). In their third shadow report on Lebanon's implementation of CEDAW, the Committee for the Follow-Up on Women's Issues, and other non-governmental Lebanese women's organizations, argue that Lebanon's ratifications are contrary to the object and purpose of the Convention which is to eliminate discrimination against women. The Lebanese government's reservations to CEDAW include paragraph 2 of Article 9 which prohibits a Lebanese woman married to a foreigner from granting nationality to her children or her husband, and Article 16 paragraph 1, sections (c) (d) (f) and (g) which pertain personal status laws governing marriage and family. (Khalifeh, 2005). Additionally, there is a reservation that allows for discriminatory laws within Lebanon's Penal Code that address adultery, violence against women in the name of "honor," abortion, rape, and prostitution (Committee for the Follow-Up on Women's Issues, 2007). As a result, women's rights and freedoms, ranging from the evidentiary weight of her court testimony, her right to be protected from family violence, to her freedom to travel or work outside of the home, vary depending on the Personal Status Codes of her religious community (Mikdashi, 2010).

Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes in Lebanese society make it difficult for women to advance their status in both private and public spheres regardless of their religious affiliation (Suad, 1997). Although Lebanese sectarianism perpetuates inequalities among women of different religions, patriarchy sustains gender disparities in myriad ways. From the time of birth, Lebanese women are identified by a family registration number through the male line (Khoury, 2013). Further, when a woman marries she is added to her husband's registration number and if divorced, she will revert to her father's number. Legal progress towards women's advancement is undermined by the patriarchal system wherein the father is the head of the household and has the last word in his family on any decision big or small (Suad, 1997; Mikdashi, 2010). Thus at this basic, yet consequential, level of identification, the state views women not as individuals, but rather as members of a social family unit headed by a male relative (Khoury, 2013).

Despite these obstacles, Lebanese women have continued to play a significant role in civil society (Zataari, 2005; Stephan, 2014) They are known as leaders among Arab nations for achieving high levels of education and increased representation in professional fields such as medicine, academics, engineering, social work and the law (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2010).

### *1.4 Women's Role in Politics*

Lebanon stands out in the Middle East for its relative political openness, religious freedom, and the academic and professional achievements of Lebanese women (Bray-Collins, 2011). Yet, paradoxically, it has one of the lowest rates of women's political participation in the region (Global Gender Gap Report, 2014). In 2012, two years after the "Arab Spring" Lebanese women still constitute only 3 percent of the National Parliament. In contrast, women Parliamentarians in Tunisia now hold 27% of the seats in its National Constituent Assembly and

Article 23 of the Tunisian electoral law, requires 50 percent of all party candidates to be women (Ohier, 2014). Yemen is currently in the process of ratifying a 30% quota for women's political participation in its new constitution (Yemeni Women Fight for Greater Representation, 2014). In the United Arab Emirates, women account for 22% of the Federal National Council (FNC) and a woman is presently the Deputy Speaker of the FNC (FNC first deputy speaker, 2014). In 2014, fifteen Bahraini women, including ministers and business leaders, were listed on the Forbes Middle East 200 Most Powerful Arab Women list (Alghata, 2014).

While Lebanese women secured the right to vote and run for political office in 1952 – nearly 20 years before women in Switzerland – only 17 women have served in Lebanon's parliament since that time and the maximum number of female members of parliament in one parliamentary term has been six (out of a total of 128 in the 2005 elections) (Khoury, 2013). In 2004, two women ministers were appointed for the first time. However, the 2011 Lebanese government failed to appoint any women as ministers. Although Lebanese women have been actively engaged in political parties since the 1970s, they have been excluded from positions of influence and decision-making. (Zataari, 2005; Khoury, 2013). As a result, the goal of promoting women's equality vis-à-vis the political process has been subordinate to the political and sectarian priorities of the parties' male leadership (Khoury, 2013).

Political familism further impacts women's political participation in Lebanon, as both voters and as candidates. As voters, women are expected to vote as part of their family unit, headed by a husband, father, or brother (Suad, 2011; Khoury, 2013). The lack of secret voting protections in Lebanese elections makes it difficult for most citizens (let alone women) to vote freely, especially in communities with a small number of voters. (Khoury, 2013). As candidates, women are first expected to defer to the political aspirations of their male relatives prior to seeking political office (Suad, 2011; Khoury, 2013). Secondly they are held to the same familial allegiances and ideologies, as are male candidates under the political familism system, regardless of personal political agendas or motivations, such as a desire to advance women's rights (Suad, 2011).

## **Part 2- The Process, Content, and Participant Discussion**

The focus of our study was an initiative undertaken by Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) Unit of Women's Affairs in July 2012 to increase women's political representation in government. Through this initiative, sex-segregated workshops on women's political empowerment were held for male and female representatives of Lebanon's political parties. Male and/or female representatives from 24 of 39 invited political parties participated. Workshops included a diverse representation of women and men from varied religious, cultural and political affiliations from far left to far right. Nine parties sent male and female representatives. One party chose to participate only during the men's workshop whereas eleven parties were represented only by females at the women's workshop. Although the turnout for the men's workshop was slightly less than for the women's workshop, the male participants were just as engaged with the issue of gender, particularly with respect to exploring the reasons for women's political dis-empowerment.

In preparation for the workshops, our interdisciplinary group of women trainers, from racially and religiously diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-national backgrounds met monthly, from March 2012 through July 2012, for 6 hour-long planning sessions to develop culturally-relevant training modules that would address the unique context of women's political empowerment and increased political participation in Lebanon. Trainers reviewed existing literature and training tools on women's political participation and delved deeply into the specific obstacles and barriers that limited Lebanese women's access to Lebanon's political systems. Trainers explored concepts of gender, patriarchy, and empowerment through the lens of various disciplines (i.e. legal, economic, social, health and well-being, advocacy, and political) as well as different religious and cultural points of view.

Leveraging their collective areas of expertise, which included psychiatry, social work, international human rights and women's rights advocacy, education and law, the trainers developed separate discussion-driven modules for male and female participants. Two objectives were identified for the trainings: reducing the barriers to women's political participation, and strengthening the capacity and skills of women in politics.

The trainer recognized several potential constraints, including the need for the female participants to freely discuss their goals, aspirations, and challenges without the constraints of traditional or patriarchal constructs. Thus, with the hope of creating a safe space for women of diverse religious, cultural, and political backgrounds to unite around the collective goal of women's increased political participation, the workshop for women covered the following topics:

- Identification and navigation of “gender power circles,”

- Strategies for navigating movement of women from the “private sphere” of the family and home to the “public sphere” as a public or political figure;
- Concepts of self-actualization and empowerment;
- Mobilization of women’s groups to build solidarity and a political base,
- Strategies for the transformation of patriarchal power structures and norms; and
- Discussion of political entry points for women candidates.

For the men’s workshop, trainers acknowledged the importance of “meeting the men where they were,” even if that meant engaging with the male participants within traditional and patriarchal frameworks in order to include men in the process of overcoming the barriers to Lebanese women’s political participation. For example, if men in Lebanon valued their gender role as “providers,” trainers would leverage this role and ask the men to help provide funds to support women running for office, as the lack of financial resources is a significant obstacle for women entering politics.

Trainers were aware of the potential danger of reinforcing patriarchal systems and beliefs by choosing to work within these frameworks rather than overtly dismissing Lebanon’s traditional gender norms. However, trainers decided that this pragmatic approach was a necessary first step to bring Lebanese women into decision-making and leadership positions that could later lead to more substantive and structural change towards women’s empowerment, such as legally reserved seats for women in parliament or voluntary gender quotas by Lebanon’s political parties.

In essence, Lebanese women needed to obtain concrete entry points to political power, and the goal of the workshops was to enable that to happen. Therefore, in addition to an overview of equal rights laws and gender disparities in Lebanon, the workshop for men explored why having women on their ballot added value to their individual and party’s political campaigns, as well as the overall governance of their country. The trainers worked with the men to simultaneously encourage them to “problem-solve” ways to overcome the barriers women faced to increased political participation, (such as fundraising, networking, gender sensitive political meeting times and trainings) and highlighted their feelings of national pride about Lebanese women being some of the most educated women among Arab countries, while encouraging them to take concrete steps to empower Lebanese women as political leaders. Additionally, the trainers discussed how gender stereotypes and expectations prevented men, as well as women, from reaching their highest (political) capacity

The format for the workshops included a series of training sessions by each of the trainers in their specific area of expertise with an extended discussion and question and answer period following each session. Participants from both workshops were highly engaged and the discussion sessions highlighted a number of persistent barriers to women’s increased political participation, as well as areas of potential for strengthening the capacity and skill of women in politics.

Participants from the men’s workshop identified Lebanon’s history of conflict and resultant emphasis on military and security needs, as well as religious and cultural traditions that hinder women’s empowerment, as key factors affecting women’s full participation in Lebanese politics. Additional comments by the male participants included Lebanon’s lack of social progress recognizing the important role of women in leadership, a lack of clarity on what Lebanese “society needed from women,” and “what it wanted her to be,” women’s second class status in Lebanon, and the perception that women must remain in the shadow of men. Central to these conversations was the perception and reality of women’s lack of empowerment in decision-making (which was seen as externally and internally maintained), men’s lack of trust and confidence in women’s capacity, and women’s time consuming care-taking responsibilities for children, the elderly, and the home.

Participants from the women’s workshop strongly stressed how Lebanon’s patriarchal culture remained a significant barrier to women’s political participation. Participants identified cultural traditions that hinder the political progress of women such as the application of laws that undermine women’s rights, particularly personal status laws, gender-based violence; challenges facing women in making the transition from the private realm to the public, including balancing family and work life expectations; ideological and psychological deterrents such as religious traditions, personal fears and lack of confidence in their own capacities, and deference to male decision-making; gender barriers in the political process and gender inequity in economic resources, training, and access to political networks and support as some of the primary barriers to women’s increased political participation in Lebanon. [TABLE 1]

Table 1. Barriers to women's political participation articulated by participants

<b>Women's workshop</b>	<b>Men's workshop</b>
Cultural traditions	Lebanon's history of conflict (military and security needs)
Laws and women's rights	Religious and cultural traditions (i.e. caregiving role)
Challenge to transitioning from private to public sphere	Lack of progress in women's leadership
Fear	Lack of clarity of what society needs/wants from women
Lack of confidence	Women as 2 <sup>nd</sup> class citizens
Deference to male decision-making	Women in men's shadows
Gender inequity in finances	Men do not trust capacity of women to govern
Lack of training programs	
Difficulty accessing political networks	

Table 1. Outcomes from the two workshops included a number of strategies to increase women's successful participation in politics. For example, it was suggested that women participants interested in running for political office highlight the expertise and skills honed in the "private sphere" of their lives – home, family, and community – to build a political platform and shape a unique political agenda which resonated with women, as well as men, in order to build a base in the new "public sphere".

Women candidates could utilize their community-based networks (i.e. schools, places of worship, local advocacy organizations) to build capacity and gain information and access, communicate concerns and insights, build financial reserves, and grow both internal and external systems of support. Women participants were also encouraged to seek out NGOs working to increase women's political capacity to strengthen their skill-sets and build confidence. Additionally, it was suggested that a strong and articulate message about the benefits of women's political empowerment needed to be developed and widely promoted within Lebanon's numerous political parties, and by the government.

### **Part 3- Workshops Wrap-up**

As the workshops were brought to a close, our recommendations followed in white paper format to MOSA [Table 2]

Table 2. List of recommendations to MOSA

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a quota system to remedy women's lack of political participation and representation at all levels of government.</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carry out a national in-depth study to understand the reasons behind women's low and declining political participation.</li> <li>• Enforce laws that promote and protect women's rights, specifically protection from violence.</li> <li>• Address gender barriers in political parties that prevent women's access and participation, including opportunities for women to highlight their unique and broad capabilities.</li> <li>• Engage male support in mentoring and promoting women's political campaigns at all levels of political participation.</li> <li>• Develop a cross-party "Women's Political Caucus" to support currently elected women officials and to nurture a "pipe-line" of future women candidates.</li> <li>• Use media to help change the "face" of politics – specifically seeking to dismantle</li> </ul> |

perceptions about politics as being masculine or not honorable. For example:

- A mother of three could be running for office in her community on a platform of health and wellbeing.
- A former schoolteacher could be running for Parliament to address national education interests.
- A female lawyer may run for a high-level judgeship to address matters of juvenile delinquency or stronger protections for the elderly and mentally ill.
- Partner with international and national NGO's to provide regular trainings to build women's political capacities, skill sets, and confidence.
- Engage religious leaders in movement to increase women's political representation

The successful mainstreaming of women in Lebanon's political processes and institutions of government will require substantive long-term policy planning that includes mobilizing public and political will and allocating sufficient resources to build capacity. Additionally, policy-makers and leaders in civil society must be willing to address the broader issues of gender equality (legal, social, and economic) that largely hinder Lebanese women's access to full and equal participation in politics.

Efforts to increase women's political participation in Lebanon will not be successful if it is viewed solely as a "women's issue." Rather, the equal and substantive political participation of women - who comprise 50 percent of the populace and citizenship - must be viewed as critical for strong democracy, good governance, and policymaking that reflects the needs and concerns of all Lebanese citizens. Both men and women must be actively engaged in breaking down the myriad barriers to women's political participation, including patriarchal institutions and beliefs, and must take concrete steps to create opportunities for women to successfully enter Lebanon's political processes and leadership roles.

We believe that an in-depth national study or commission does not mean seeing the world from a female perspective. Exploring would allow Lebanon to open up to men's and women's needs and experiences related to a healthy political life. This in turn would allow for a more thorough probing of the deeper questions of why gender differences and disparities exist in Lebanon's political systems; how the country's unique social and political context, such as political familism and its confessionalism form of government, reinforces the disparities between men's and women's participation in politics; and what can be done to address the gender imbalances in political representation in government.

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