

# **LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

Why are Lebanese women not present in the Parliament?  
Linking the Academic Literature to Activism

By

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the degree of Master of Arts in International Affairs

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# Why are Lebanese women not present in the Parliament? Linking the Academic Literature to Activism

Maria Tannous

## Abstract

Why are Lebanese women not present in parliament? The literature that tries to explain the low presence of Lebanese women in the parliament offers several explanations that present an academic understanding of this issue. However, after reviewing this literature, it became manifest that it does not study in depth the position of Lebanese women activists in this regard. Thus, this thesis aims to fill this methodological gap by asking Lebanese women activists about the factors that are behind the low presence of women in the Lebanese parliament. This thesis argues that without understanding their position on the matter, the literature might miss valuable input from important stakeholders on explaining why Lebanese women are not being able to reach the parliament. This thesis provides a bridge between the views of academics with those of activists following three steps. First it asks Lebanese women activists the question on what are the factors behind the low number of Lebanese women in the parliament. Then it compares their answers with what the academic literature has been saying about this topic. Finally, it will present the factors proposed by the activists that the academic literature needs to further study.

Keywords: Elections, Women's Rights, Gender Equality, Lebanon, Lebanese Women, Women Representation, Women Participation, Parliament, Activists,

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Gender equality and political participation are two major concepts in the realm of political science that have been thoroughly studied and explained. Although gender equality is not only examined with respect to political notions such as representation and participation, nor political participation is only measured in terms of equality between men and women, both the political process and political institutions are key reflectors of the extent to which a certain country has low or high level of gender equality.

This means that the presence of females in the government, parliament, presidency, and key political leadership positions in a country is a fair representative of its gender equality indices. As Kassem (2013) explains, a very common indicator of women's political participation that is used by researchers is women's representation in the parliament (p. 3). Accordingly, to assess key aspects of political gender equality in a country, examining the number of women candidates for parliamentary elections, the number of women voters, the percentage of seats won by women, their participation in political parties and the extent to which the latter are accessible to women, in addition to the general presence of women before, during, and after this whole process, are reliable instruments and informative determinants of political gender equality.

In fact, there was a reemergence of the topic on electoral representation within the Democratic Theory. As Urbinati and Warren (2008) explain, electoral democracy a main component of the Democratic Theory that authorizes representatives who are

elected to represent citizens who elect them and act on behalf of their interests. These representatives are then held accountable in the next elections (p. 397-398). Within the context of Democratic Theory, gender equality and women's representation matter because they are indices about the health of democracy within a state and that of the understanding of the concept of representation (Rubenstein, Bergin, & Rowe, 2020).

In the case of Lebanon, women haven't historically exceeded 5% of the parliamentary seats. The country ranks on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index as 145th out of 152 countries (El Kaakour, 2020). These are empirical reflections on the unhealthiness of democracy and the defaults in the democratic notion of electoral representation in Lebanon. Among the criteria that the index takes into consideration is women's political empowerment within the country. As defined by the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, this sub-index measures "the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in ministerial positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions" in addition to the "ratio of women to men in terms of years in executive office" (Insight Report Global Gender Gap Report 2020, 2019, p. 47). It is clear that along this definition Lebanon hasn't achieved noticeable progress to allow for an acceptable ratio of women to men in decision-making positions. In fact, Lebanon ranks at position 149 out of 152 countries under the sub-index of Political Empowerment (p. 219).

Taken away by the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality in politics and giving women accessibility to the parliament, since it's a key institution wherein laws and decisions are taken, as well as ensuring the presence of women in key political leadership decision-making positions, researchers, NGOs, civil society, campaigners and

lobbyists, are frequently driven by the assessment of the indicators mentioned above, i.e. counting the number of women and pushing for an increase in this number. Generally, it's either by implementing high quotas on political parties' electoral lists or the number of seats allocated for women in the parliament.

Although working to amend structural and procedural practices and rules that hinder women from participating in politics and being part of the parliament is a key factor in achieving gender equality, understanding the opinions of women regarding their role in politics is even a more nuanced and specific step that will render these efforts more fruitful. Meaning, just as in advertisement, advertisers aim at understanding the specific insights that they must target in their audience for them to achieve higher impacts and increase sales, asking women about the factors that either encourage or hinder women to run as candidates for a parliamentary election might give new insights on this topic and highlight areas that need further research.

## **The Case of Lebanese Women**

As Khoury (2013) explains, although Lebanese women have acquired the right to run for elections as well as vote since 1952, which is 20 years before women in Switzerland, only 17 women have been members of the parliament between the years 1952 and 2013. Between the years 1953 and 1975, the country held six parliamentary elections with only three women running for seats (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.). In addition, the maximum number of women to be serving in the same parliament has been 6 women only. Besides, it was only until 2004 that the first 2 female ministers were appointed in the government.

During Lebanon's latest parliamentary elections that took place on May 6, 2018, under a new electoral law, a critical question arose concerning the change that might occur in relation to the participation of Lebanese women in this political process and their share of the 128 parliamentary seats. Especially that the electoral law shifted from majoritarian to proportional, with new opportunities for smaller groups to get a seat in the decision-making process. Regarding women, observers initially celebrated the 113 women candidates that ran for these elections out of a total number of 976 candidates (NDI Lebanon 2018 Parliamentary Elections International Observation Mission Final report, 2019). The result was an increase from 4 to 6 women in the Lebanese parliament (Lebanon elects six women to Parliament, 2018). That is an increase from 3.125 % to 4.687%.

Adding to these figures, during the municipal elections of 2016, women candidates only represented 6.9% of the total candidates (Women in Municipal Elections, 2016). Although, in one way or another, municipal elections are more local and on a smaller scale than parliamentary elections. Yet women's participation is very low, in both. So, after 67 years of securing their right to run for elections, women's participation in this political process remains low.

On the other hand, Lebanese women themselves have long been active within civil society organizations and on the streets. They protested during the 1950s for the purpose of defending their political rights. They are strong defenders of social rights and are founders of several organizations with charitable and social causes. Generally, they have always exhibited interest in civil society movements. However, although Lebanese

women play a considerable role in civil society and the private sector, their numbers remain very low in regard to their entry into the parliament (Kingston, et al., 2011).

This gap resurfaced following the uprisings that erupted in Lebanon since the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019. Putting aside that the uprisings themselves left the local and the international audiences in an awe, the huge presence and participation of women has been beyond surprising. The unfolding events have been described as “women-led protests” (Elbasnaly and Knipp, 2019). Why is this surprising? Because in Lebanon, women have been absent from political institutions and decision-making positions for decades now. This absence has left Lebanon ranking on the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index as 145<sup>th</sup> out of 152 countries (El Kaakour, 2020). Their absence was justified based on their unwillingness to participate and indifference to politics. These protests provided additional evidence that women have the will to be politically engaged. In fact, it allowed for the classification of women’s participation along two categories: formal and informal.

Within the context of this thesis, formal political participation of women implies their presence in the parliament which is the legislative hand of the government. This presence is being described as formal because it’s subject to structural and legal procedures. You cannot randomly be a member of the parliament. For a woman to become a member she has to run for elections, have an electoral program, mobilize people and gain votes. Once an MP, her work will also be subject to specific rules and procedures. If she wants to call for a right she needs to draft proposals and abide by the formality of the process. She will not simply stand in front of the parliament and protest. So the formality of this type of political participation describes the process through

which women enter into this arena and the nature of the work they have to do to support their demands and activism.

On the other hand, informal political participation of women, within the context of his thesis, implies their presence on the streets during protests. Despite the fact that some women might be members of certain NGOs or other groups, the nature of their participation in protests is not subject to a specific protocol or nomination. Once a woman has the will to take on the streets and voice her demands, she is automatically considered a member of this wider movement. No one has to elect her if she wishes to be present. She can shout, yell, protests, and voice out her demands whether solely or within a group. The spontaneous nature of the process which women go through to represent themselves within this political arena has this informal nature. In this sense, the difference between the presence of Lebanese women in the formal institutions and the informal political sphere has a substantial meaning because it tackles different levels of issues that women face when participating in politics.

How does Lebanese women's participation differ between these two spheres? During the uprisings of October 2019, women exhibited high levels of leadership. A woman who kicked a firearm out of the hands of a man "has become the icon of the Lebanese protests" (Alghoul, 2019). As these events unfolded, women played major roles in organizing various activities and maintaining the momentum of the protests. Some devoted their kitchens to cook for the protestors, others organized activities to raise awareness and appeared on TVs to express their anger and demand rights. Women were not afraid to take the streets and challenge the state and its police.

As described in the report done by UN Women on the role of Lebanese women during the demonstrations, women from different socioeconomic and sectarian backgrounds were leading the protests and mutually supporting each other's efforts. As documented in this report, women saw an opportunity in these political events to access the public space while being in the streets and to participate in conversations that are usually rooted in deep "patriarchal and conservative gender norms" (Wilson, Zabaneh, & Dore-Weeks, 2019).

The report additionally lists key initiatives that Lebanese women took during the protests to support the larger cause as well as protestors themselves. They took into consideration both the mental and physical needs of the crowds. So in addition to the distribution of food and winter needs, they made sure to set psychosocial first aid services and run self-defense trainings, for example (Wilson, Zabaneh, & Dore-Weeks, 2019). In fact, women groups utilized this opportunity to shed light on pressing issues that are integral to the development of the country and the plan of saving its environment and people. When streets became filled with trash from the protesters, women paid attention to the issue and organized daily clean-ups that abided by the recycling process.

When comparing this large presence of women in the informal political sphere, including all the leadership roles that they played, with their shy presence in the Lebanese parliament, the question on the reasons behind this gap becomes a pressing issue. Lebanese women have the will to participate. They were "on front lines of protests" (Lewis, 2019) and knew well about the corruption, the problems, and the solutions. Why are they active in the informal sphere but inactive in the formal one? If

they know about politics and can play substantial leadership roles within an unstructured atmosphere such as protests, what is making them unable to carry this participation forward by becoming members of the parliament? To answer this question, it is not enough to review the literature. Women activists should be asked about this gap. What are, in the opinion of Lebanese women activists, the factors that hinder them from entering parliament and how can they be mitigated?

## **Research Question**

The literature on the low presence of women in the Lebanese parliament offers several explanations that represent an academic understanding to this issue. However, after reviewing this literature, it was concluded that it does not study in depth the position of Lebanese women activists in regard to this topic. This thesis considered this to be a methodological gap and argued that the opinion of Lebanese women activists should be studied and taken into consideration.

Activism is defined as an involvement in action to induce change (Moola, 2004, p. 39). So activists are involved in the field and aspire to bring about change. They cannot accomplish this if they do not know the existing problems and what should be done to fix them. This implies that activists are knowledgeable about the topic they defend. They can describe what is already there and know what should be done. This is not based on their distant observation of events but their real-life experiences and personal involvement. In the case of women activists in Lebanon, their long history of activism is a proof that they have a rich repertoire of knowledge that covers the political, social, economic, and religious aspects of the topic on women's political participation.

They know what women face in the public sphere. They have a closer look at things because of their direct involvement.

The aim of this thesis was to link the point of view of academics with that of activists following three steps. First it asked Lebanese women activists the question on what are the factors behind the low presence of women in the parliament in Lebanon. Then it compared their answers with what the academic literature has been saying about this topic. Finally it pointed out the common points between the two and highlighted the additional concerns discussed by the activists. Based on these findings, the thesis showed that the two fields complement each other when the opinions of activists are studied in depth by academic scholars. Without understanding their position on the matter, the literature might miss valuable input of important stakeholders on explaining the low presence of women in politics and precisely in the Lebanese parliament.

El-Helou (1970a) discusses the point of the importance to understand the experiences of people in the field when she addresses the issue on gender quota. She explains that “Having no personal political ambitions, and facing no obstacles of a discriminatory nature to self-achievement (...), it was hard for me to grasp the logic behind the demands for a women’s quota,” (p.2). She considered it as demeaning and undemocratic until she examined in depth the experiences of women in politics, specifically women candidates, that she was convinced to reassess her position and examine the obstacles that these women face as well as the solutions that a temporary quota might bring out.

## **Significance of Understanding Women's Opinion**

There are several reasons behind the necessity to understand the opinion of Lebanese women regarding the factors that attempt to explain their low presence in the parliament. First, it will narrow the gap that exists in the literature regarding this matter. In general, the literature on the status of Lebanese women in politics focuses on three major aspects of this issue; structural problems, socio-political explanations, and religious concerns that affect women's presence in the political arena. The participation of women in the latest uprisings has shown that they do have the will to fight for their right of political participation. But what about carrying this duty forward and running for parliamentary elections? Is it – as the literature mentions – economic, patriarchal, social, and structural factors that hinder women from being politically active? What is the stance of Lebanese women activists regarding these arguments and what might they add to this literature?

This step will present a rich source for academics to build on their analysis on this topic especially that it will provide a nuanced understanding to it. It will shed light on concerns that the literature might have missed. In addition, the importance of having a clear answer to this question is that it will help guide any future attempt to implement strategies to help women be more engaged in politics and more capable to run for elections. It will provide a compass to guide researchers and lawmakers specialized in policy making and policy implementation procedures that tackle women's rights and issues.

Another reason is the fact that there are actual studies that recommend asking women about their opinion regarding their political participation. A study was

undertaken by the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) Unit of Women's Affairs in July 2012 that aimed at examining the concepts that affect women's participation and representation in politics by holding workshops to discuss women's political empowerment targeting male and female representatives from 24 of 39 invited Lebanese political parties (Henderson, Nelson, and Chemali, 2015). As explained in the study, nine parties sent male and female representatives, one party only participated at the men's workshop, and eleven parties only participated at the women's workshop (p. 236).

The findings from the two workshops were a set of strategies proposed to increase women's participation in politics. These included ways to help women enter into the "public sphere," build their capacity to access and gain information, communicate their concerns and insights, build financial support, and seek out NGOs to strengthen their skills and build confidence. In addition, it was suggested that an articulate message about the benefits of women's political empowerment needed to be developed and promoted within Lebanon's political parties, and the government itself (p. 238).

In the recommendation section of this study, there's a clear focus on the necessity for an in-depth study to understand the reasons behind women's low political participation; their concerns and insights. This understanding cannot be enough if only studied from an outside observation based on the analysis of the structural and socio-political explanations mentioned above. Instead, a study that precisely reflects what Lebanese women think of themselves as participants in politics is highly needed to help in guiding any effort that aims at helping to increase the presence of women in politics.

In sum, dissecting the socio-politico-economic factors and asking women about their opinions regarding each of them will give a clearer image on how to help, support, and encourage women to express their concerns relating to this issue. The importance of this study increases amid the current continuous changes in the political dynamics in Lebanon. Describing the system in which Lebanese women live and function is important to understand the context in which to analyze their political behavior. However, asking them about their personal opinions, fears, and hopes is as important to design better campaigns, workshops, conferences, laws, and regulations that aim at increasing the number of women in the formal political sphere.

## **Methodology and Sampling**

The purpose of this study is to hear the opinions of Lebanese women activists regarding the low presence of women in the Lebanese parliament and compare them with the existing academic literature on this topic. The convenient method to reach this goal was to hold interviews with Lebanese women activists who, based on their backgrounds, have direct experiences with activism and are aware of the features of the informal and formal political spheres in the country. So a common criterion among the interviewees is that they are all activists and have also participated in the uprisings of the October 17 revolution. Another criterion was related to age. The sample included Lebanese women activists who are above the age of twenty five because according to the Lebanese electoral law, these can run as candidates during the parliamentary elections. They can also vote during these elections since the minimum age for voters is twenty one.

So a list of names was compiled based on research about vocal Lebanese women activists who showed during these protests and have active role in women's issues activism. In addition, a list of previous women candidates during the 2018 elections was also compiled. These women have direct experiences with what it takes to run for parliamentary elections in Lebanon and have tangible encounters with the challenges that are faced. They are able to give direct insights based on personal encounters with the formal political sector. There were no specific criteria regarding sect, marital status, working status or education taken into consideration as a condition for selection. After contacting the activists and after receiving confirmations from them to participate, a final list was prepared with these names who met two conditions: activists and above the age of twenty five.

The process of contacting candidates for the interviews depended on online research of their contact information and people in contact with these networks of women activists. Available candidates were sent the required forms as approved by the Lebanese American University (LAU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). These included information about the study and the consent form they shall sign once they agree to participate in the interviews. After receiving the final approvals, the list of participants was compiled and it generated a sample of women whose ages range between the late twenties and late forties. Some of them are married and some are not, and those who are married have kids. Their educational attainments vary between Bachelor degree, Master's degree, and PhD. Their working statuses vary between employed, self-employed and employer.

Two types of interviews were held: focus groups and individual interviews. Both were held online due to Covid19 restrictions and the inability to meet face-to-face. The purpose of choosing to hold focus groups was to allow for interactions and the expression of diverse opinions of these women. The diversity among the participants allowed for rich exchange of perspectives. Some opinions were challenged, re-addressed and assessed. The goal behind choosing to hold focus groups was met and the discussions exposed the variety of concerns that Lebanese women activists hold regarding their status in general, and regarding their low presence in the parliament in specific. As for the individual interviews, they were held with women activists who, based on their work field and personal experiences, discussed elaborately a specific angle of the topic on women representation in the parliament. This sample includes, but is not limited to, previous candidates during the 2018 parliamentary elections.

The discussions will be presented within the framework that is set by this whole thesis; what are the opinions of Lebanese women activists regarding the low presence of women in the parliament and what can they add to the existing academic literature. For example, a key concern that was voiced by a participant is the huge amount of bullying that a woman might be subject to if she chooses to run for elections. As she explains, although she would want to run for elections, the fear from the possible rumors that she, her husband, and her kids might be attacked with, affects her eagerness to take this risk. She puts in mind whether her family will be able to handle the burden of these possible rumors and their effect on their wellbeing.

The discussions from the focus groups are presented anonymously. The purpose was to keep participants comfortable in challenging each other's views and expressing

all their personal thoughts and opinions as well as critically assessing each other's thoughts and opinions without the need to mention who said what to who. The flow of the focus groups was meant to extract tangible answers based on interactive discussions among Lebanese women activists from different backgrounds. The effect of the previously mentioned variables is exhibited by the answers of the participants especially when it comes to the possibility of pursuing a political career. Maybe surprisingly, the youngest showed the least interest to enter the formal political sphere and run for parliamentary elections due to the fact that she is still young and her main focus is on her career. The discussion steered the question on the reluctance of the youth, in general, to enter the political realm, and on the reluctance of female youths specifically. They are less likely to be adopted by political parties. They are less likely to inherit the political position of their fathers.

As for the individual interviews, participants had three options: to be identified by first and last name and title, by first name only or not to be identified. The study respected the choices of the participants and allowed them to provide consent based on personal preferences. All interviewees chose to be identified by first and last name and title. These interviews were held with women who, based on their work field and personal experiences, elaborately discussed a specific area regarding the broader topic on Lebanese women's low presence in the parliament. Based on alphabetical order, the interviewees include:

- Journalist Diana Moukalled
- Human Rights Expert and Political Activist Dr. Halime El Kaakour

- Political and Social Activist Neamat Baderaldeen
- Previous Secretary General of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) Yara Nassar

As such, this study utilizes a qualitative approach to answer its question, without the use of any form of statistics or data aggregation. For secondary sources, the study collected content from previously published studies. As for its primary sources, these included inputs from the focus groups and individual interviews. The instrument used for both types of interviews was a questionnaire with a list of eight questions approved by the IRB.

## **Limitations**

This thesis does not claim that the input received from the participating women activists is representative of the general Lebanese women population. The sample of this study can be fairly representative of Lebanese women activists who aspire to induce change in the system that governs women's participation in the formal political sphere in the country.

This study is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to shed light on the need for up-to-date studies that capture the changing dynamics of women's participation in the formal political sphere in Lebanon. This country lacks aggregated data on many topics including women's participation in the parliament. This thesis highlights the importance of conducting further studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to enrich the library on this topic especially that the 2018 parliamentary elections set a precedent on the number of women candidates. In addition, the October 2019 uprisings reflected the level of

which Lebanese women are politically aware and engaged. Such events stir questions on the continuous absence of women from the parliament and invite further studies to address this issue.

A good pool to begin with is women activists who have tangible experiences in the field and know about the existing problems and the possible solutions. This thesis attempted to benefit from the knowledge of this group. However, broader studies should be conducted with a larger number of participants and higher logistical capabilities that can allow for the compilation of updated data and statistics.

## **Content of Chapters**

Chapter Two reviews the academic literature on the reasons behind the low presence of women in the parliament. It aggregates a list of factors that are considered to undermine the ability of Lebanese women to reach the parliament. It shows that the literature does not study in depth the opinions of Lebanese women activists regarding this topic. The thesis will not ask women to assess this compiled list but will use it as a reference to check whether interviewing activists will add new concerns and factors to the existing literature or not.

Chapter Three examines the history of Lebanese women's activism. It shows that Lebanese women activists are key stakeholders that should be present on the table when discussing the topic of women's presence in the parliament. They have a rich and historical baggage that cannot be dismissed from the literature that studies this topic. Their input covers a compilation of past, present and future concerns.

Chapter Four compiles the answers of the Lebanese women activists on the question about the factors that are leading to the low presence of women in the Lebanese parliament.

Chapter Five proposes a list of solutions to the obstacles that hinder Lebanese women's political participation in the parliament based on the opinions and personal experiences of the interviewed activists. The answers and discussions presented in this chapter cover three main questions that were addressed to the participants: Why are women present in the streets but absent from the parliament? Would you consider running for parliamentary elections, why or why not? How can we encourage Lebanese women to run for parliamentary elections?

# Chapter Two

## A Review of the Academic Literature

This chapter presents a review of the academic literature on the factors that affect the political participation of Lebanese women and undermine their presence within the formal political sphere. This review allows for the listing of key problems that scholars and researchers consider as obstacles in the way of Lebanese women's political advancement in the parliament. The thesis will not ask women to assess this compiled list but will use it as a reference to check whether interviewing activists will add new concerns and factors to the literature or not.

The importance of an approach that brings activists and politically involved women, some of whom are previous candidates, closer to academia is reflected in the words of El-Helou (1970a) when she explained that she couldn't understand the logic behind the demand of a gender quota in the parliament until she "ventured into the field of gender and politics to conduct long in-depth personal interviews with female candidates" (p. 2). When she heard their experiences, she "became convinced of the need to revise [her] position" (p. 2). This transition from being against such a measure to understanding the needs behind it was only possible by getting closer to the daily experiences of women in the political field and understanding the challenges they face.

## **Structural Factors**

Kingston (2011) considers two main structural problems that lead to gender inequality specifically in relation to the presence of women in politics: patriarchy and path-dependency. Patriarchy implies the privileging of men in senior and leadership positions and legitimizing this privilege. Path-dependency implies the reinforcement of Lebanon's consociational and confessional system that reasserts the proportional division of political power between sectarian communities. These two structural issues that affect the political system, instigate a patriarchal environment, support clientelism and reinforce communitarian modes of ruling as well as populist leadership, not only do they affect individual rights in general but are key factors leading to discrimination against women.

Patriarchy strives on notions that are based on negative attitudes towards women's capabilities to be political agents. For example, if a man and woman are running for a parliamentary seat, the man is less likely to be assessed according to his skills and capabilities in comparison with the woman. The fact that he is a male gives him privilege over the female candidate because of existing stereotypes that women are either not interested in politics or not suitable for political work. The issue that magnifies the effects of this patriarchal framework is that it is being sustained, both by men and women. As Khatib (2008) explains, these stereotypes are sustained and passed on to different generations through socialization, which encourages men to be interested in political careers while discouraging women to do so (p. 444). This means that not only do men become unaccepting to the presence of women in the political sphere, but women themselves become reluctant to demand participation.

Path-dependency implies a resistance against change despite modern transformations. Within the Lebanese context, this means that despite societal advancements the country remained confined to old rules and laws that did not follow up with new realities. As Kingston (2011) explains, despite the growth of an educated class and an increase in the number of women within the public sector, in addition to major campaigns that support change, the institutional structure that undermines the support for women advancement persisted in a manner that reinforces the status quo and the consociational political structure that exists (p. 12). In this sense, the Lebanese system remains path-dependent and unable to set its citizens, especially women, free from ancient regulations that prohibit their progression within the formal political sphere.

Joseph (1996) presents a thorough analysis on the relations among these discriminatory systems that result in women being unequal citizens with men. As she explains, states in which kinship and patriarchal norms and practices are integrated into the system always view women in relation to a male figure such as her father, brother or husband. In other words, such states do not treat women and men as equal citizens (p. 8). This perception translates into discriminatory practices against women on all level, whether social, economic, legal or political.

The result of this translates into serious obstacles against the advancement of women in society because of the ambiguity that surrounds their identity as citizens within the state. As Joseph (2000) explains, when the systems of patriarchy and kinship dictate the laws and practices within the state, the basic unit of society is no longer the individual him- or herself. Instead, this unit is the family. Since in Arab states, including

Lebanon, the head of this unit is a male figure on whom women in the family should be dependent, the position of women within the state becomes multilayered and becomes defined through this familial relation with men. In brief, the result is a gendering of citizenship that stands in the way of women becoming full citizens within the state. This affects their attempts to demand rights and reforms due to the complexity of their identity within the whole structure that treats women based on a relational identity with men (p.14-15). This complex cause-and-effect relation affects how society perceives women and how the state treats women. In other words, it translates into cultural, economic, legal and political practices that do not treat women as equal to men.

### **Role of Political Leaders**

Rowayheb (2014) discusses an additional factor related to the role of political leaders and their interests. In his opinion, political leaders play a major role in hindering the empowerment of women since they do not support their advancement within the parties and do not allow for their presence in key positions and roles. This is due to several reasons tied to the background and future interests of the leaders. On one hand, certain parties do not support women empowerment due to religious reasons that dictate the separation between men and women and do not allow for mixed committees. These are usually parties with Islamic beliefs. On the other hand, parties such as the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Lebanese Forces do not have such religious concerns but are instead dictated by a power struggle that exists between them (p. 183-184).

Although women in both parties exhibited high levels of leadership during the absence of the parties' political leaders Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea in exile and in prison, respectively, none of the two men showed willingness to enhance the position of

women within the structure of their parties when they resumed leadership in Lebanon. Nor did they call for the drafting of laws that introduce a quota for women in elections. This is due to their eagerness to maintain full control of their movements via a nepotistic approach that rendered the introduction of gender-equality enhancements almost null (Rowayheb, 2014, p. 184).

In fact, the relation between the three structural problems of patriarchy, path-dependency and the role of political leaders is articulated by Helou (2011) who explains that the social features of patriarchy in Lebanon are highly manifested in Lebanese political parties in the sense that all their leaders are males mirroring the populist father-type image that has been reinforcing gender disparities in the country. In other words, there is a “lack of serious political will to enhance gender equality” (El-Helou, 1970b, p.63).

## **Social, Economic and Political Factors**

Kassem (2013) elaborates on five main explanations that affect the status of women and their level of presence in the public sector including the political institutions such as the government and parliament (p.6). Kassem’s presentation of these factors is to a large extent inclusive to key social, economic and political issues that researchers and studies focus on when analyzing gender equality and participation of women in politics.

The first of these five explanations that Kassem (2013) presents is the country’s level of development mainly measured by the GDP per capita of this country. The general observation concluded by feminists and scholars is that the higher the GDP the

better is the political status of women due to better economic and social factors including educational attainment. The second explanation is the type of political regime in the country; female representation is higher in democratic regimes than in authoritarian ones. Democracies with high incomes are better off than autocracies with low incomes when it comes to female representation.

The third factor is the type of electoral system; those with quotas for females and proportional electoral systems give more incentives for women to be part of the political arena. El-Helou (1970b) addresses the issue of gender quota and considers that the existing confessional, feudalist and clientist political system hinders the implementation of the quota in the parliament (p. 63). Since the implementation of quota is a key measure to enhance the presence of women in the parliament, not doing so is clearly considered a factor leading to the low presence of female members of parliament.

The fourth explanation relates to the political culture within a state (Kassem, 2013). This includes cultural traditions, customs, norms and values all being linked in a way or another to patriarchal paradigms. As El-Helou (1970b) explains, factors that work against the broader representation of women in key decision-making positions include a mixture between a patriarchal and religiously-based culture as well as ensuing gender-based role perceptions. These present women as weak players incapable of venturing in the field of politics (p. 63-64). Examples include that a woman's place is at home or politics is for men.

Finally, the fifth argument that is presented as part of the socio-political explanations is the effect of religion. Especially in developing countries, religion is said to have a salient role in politics specifically in affecting the extent to which women can

or cannot be major participants in the political process (Kassem, 2013, p. 6-16).

However, due to the fact that in Lebanon religion is a key determinant not only of women's roles in politics, but of their general position vis-à-vis men, this factor will be further elaborated on in the next section.

Kassem (2013) develops each of these explanations and concludes each with clear statements that neither of them is solely enough to explain the level of participation of women in politics and many countries fall short from fitting into the relation established between some of the factors and the level of representation of women in them. Some mechanisms are only facilitators to have higher female participation but none are affirmative determinants of higher results (p. 7-13).

In fact, Lebanese women secured several economic and social rights during the 20<sup>th</sup> century including the right to own businesses, apply to the army, travel without the permission of their husbands as well as seek higher education and be part of the workforce (Khatib, 2008, p.437). However, the securing of these rights does not imply the absence of legal economic discrimination against women. For example, as Abdo and Kerbage (2012) explain, the laws that regulate the work of businesses in Lebanon are gender-neutral which means they don't explicitly support women to overcome the informal discrimination they face within the workplace and society (p. 69). This means that even if a woman is hired for a job or is allowed to run a small business, since the law allows her to do so, the existing structural and social barriers that discriminate against her potentials and capabilities are not subject to the law. She might not get promoted because she has familial responsibilities and can't handle a leadership

position. She won't receive a higher salary because she is entitled to a maternal leave or because the man is the one who's responsible to finance the household.

Even workplaces that claim to support women often ignore the structural and societal constraints that affect women's progression. In pursuit of women empowerment, they focus during their trainings, for example, on individual skills such as communication and management considering that these will boost women's confidence and capabilities. These efforts, as Abdo and Kerbage (2012) further explain, ignore the macro-economic, political, and social restraints that do not allow for the full participation of women in the economy (p. 72).

As a result, women are not economically empowered and lack sufficient financial independence. This is an obstacle in their way to reach the parliament because political campaigns need high budgets. As El-Helou (1970b) summarizes it, "economic obstacles are most apparent in the high cost of electoral campaigns that may be beyond the reach of many women, mainly those who lack financial independence" (p.64).

## **Religious Factor**

Back to the religious factor, Saadeh (2011) argues that there is an inextricable link between religious domination and discrimination against women. In the context of this thesis, this implies a strong relation between women's participation and representation in politics and their religious status. Given that Lebanon is a country that is highly dictated and affected by sectarian and religious norms and laws, it becomes unavoidable to discuss this point when studying the status of women in this country.

In fact, this link exists outside the borders of Lebanon and is agreed upon internationally. In the opinion of Casanova and Philip (2009), religion threatens gender equality specifically when its power is formally or informally integrated into the political system. They add, this does not mean that religion is an obstacle that inhibits a society from achieving gender equality but the ambiguity that surrounds the different ways that women's rights are interpreted by religious political leaders (as cited in Grung, 2018, p. 175). The complexity of this topic increases because it's intractably related to the existence of a patriarchal structure – discussed above – which renders it harder to instill changes that support women. Since the dos and don'ts are determined by religious institutions instead of civil ones, i.e. the state, women's agency and freedom are undermined since patriarchy is the milestone upon which religious institutions are built (Abou-Habib, 2011, p. 446).

In Lebanon, religion is a key determinant of the lives of the citizens as a whole as well as women specifically. It is well-known that for each of the 18 sects in this country, there exists a body of beliefs, norms, rules, laws, political affiliations, and future visions. Each sectarian community has its established identity governed by a specific personal-status law, a populist leader that builds his populism on top of sectarian notions and calls for unity, and sometimes external connections from religious authorities that boost these communities' power within the country. Religion and politics in Lebanon are inseparable and mutually dependent.

Accordingly, when it comes to studying the status of women in politics, religion is one of the main independent variables that might explain the presence or absence of women in politics, as well as the role she's capable of playing. Add to that, the very

personal status of a woman in Lebanon and her identification in public records in the government is always linked to a male figure; her father when she's unmarried, divorced, or widowed, or her husband when she's married. Thus, on this very basic level, women's identities are never independent from a male relative who represents the reference of the family.

## **Legal Issues**

There exist two sets of laws within the Lebanese state: civil and secular laws vs. the personal status codes. As Shehadeh (2010) explains, the first deal with issues such as labor, citizenship, obligations as well as inheritance for Christians while the second deal with matters of marriage, divorce, children custody as well as inheritance for Muslims. On top of these two is the Lebanese constitution, which according to its 7<sup>th</sup> Article, considers all Lebanese citizens as equal under the law. However, no clause tackles the issue of gender discrimination or explicitly prohibits it (Khatib, 2008, p.439). In addition, Lebanon has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Nevertheless, the Lebanese government excluded several Articles and expressed reservations on those that deal with personal and family status laws which are governed by the religious authorities in the country (Khatib, 2008, p.440).

Why does this matter? According to Shehadeh (2010), society defines its regulations and behavior through the sets of laws that exist that tend to establish what's natural or not (p.212). This is what gives the law its power in that its implications transcend the text in itself and affect the values of men and women as to what they can or cannot do and how they are supposed to behave. In the case of Lebanese women, the

law's effects on their status has implications on both the personal/private level as well as the public one. The constraints that are legitimized by sectarian laws and religious authorities which affect a woman's ability to decide on personal matters, such as divorce or child custody, place her in a lower rank when compared to men. The result is a group of citizens who have a weak position vis-à-vis men within the household, i.e. on a local level. Automatically, this group will be also marginalized on a broader level, i.e. the public sphere and the political arena. In fact, the empirical manifestation of the relation between women's advancement and the nature of the legal system in a country is exhibited through the claim by Maktabi (2012) who explains that in the MENA region, women in states that are relatively homogeneous with unitary court systems acquired more civil rights through parliament than those in multi-religious states with a dual court system, i.e. Lebanon (p. 57).

## **Role of Civil Society and NGOs**

As Daou (2015) assures, despite the fact that Lebanon has witnessed a major growth in the number of NGOs working on women activism and empowerment, very few thorough empirical studies have been done on the impact that these entities have had on women's empowerment in general. Her study addressed this issue and showed that although women NGOs in Lebanon have enhanced women's self-efficacy in different ways, they haven't been able to fully empower women in achieving gender justice (p. 20-21). This is due to factors related to these organizations themselves as well as to the external environment within which these organizations function.

External factors include all the political, legal and socio-economic reasons that have been addressed. These have a substantial effect on the ability of these organizations to induce fundamental change and allow women to reach full empowerment. However, the other set of factors is related to the structures of these NGOs and the relation among them.

El-Helou (1970b), addresses the role of women NGOs in regard to the implementation of a gender quota. She considers that this sector suffers from a lack of coordination on the issue of women quota. Second, there is more competition among these NGOs rather than cooperation which sometimes leads to the duplication of work and waste of money and effort. Third, few NGOs are able to exert pressure on decision-makers and change their behavior. In addition, NGOs lack coordination with the other entities that work in the same field such as the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW). All these factors, coupled with a lack of needed funds and rotation of power in some women NGOs, have undermined the role of these entities to induce change and implement a quota for women in the Lebanese parliament (p. 64-65). So even groups who are considered to be facilitators of women's political participation can be obstacles themselves due to internal structural mismanagement as well as lack of external coordination.

A recent study that was published while this thesis was being written addresses the impact of the work of women's political empowerment (WPE) programming and women's political participation (WPP) programming in Lebanon. Conducted by Nassif (2020), the study concluded that while these programs provide trainings for women on certain topics such as the nature of electoral laws, they tend to fall short from

empowering women against structural, cultural, and economic obstacles that prevent them not only from participating in the formal political sphere but also receiving substantive representation on a national level (p. 28-29). In other words, training women on certain topics and focusing on increasing their presence in the parliament or decision-making positions is not enough to ensure that women's issues are addressed and worked on.

### **Relations between Factors**

None of the above factors is solely enough to explain this phenomenon but rather they are interlinked in a way that weaves a complex web of obstacles standing in the face of Lebanese women. Both on the macro- and micro-levels, the literature discusses several problems that are considered to have an effect on women's political participation. The relation between these factors can be manifested in several ways. For example, religion affects the economic capability of women when sectarian inheritance laws limit their right to inherit lands and monetary resources while transferring them to male relatives in the family.

As for the relation between politics and religion, both political interests and religious concerns affect the ability of Lebanese women to provoke substantial reforms that facilitate their presence in the political sphere. In the opinion of Maktabi (2012), the shared interest between these two establishments is to uphold Lebanon with a group-based citizenship (p. 58). This implies that a balance of power should be maintained among the sectarian communities that the country is made of. In this case, the head of each community will attempt to resist any change that affects the existing structure and that might undermine his power as well as the power of the patriarchal structure within

which these communities exist. In other words, when the political stability is dependent on the balance of power between state institutions and religious communities, it becomes hard to gain support for legal change (Grung, 2018, p. 179). Each community will throw blame on the other, using the need for power balance as an excuse to avoid introducing changes, so that other communities do not get angry.

A final example, which many consider as a clear indication of the effect of religious politics on Lebanese women is that they cannot pass their Lebanese citizenship to their children. This is only possible through male citizens married to non-citizens. The explanations behind this prohibition is linked to demographic reasons and geopolitical calculations that aim at maintaining a Christian-Muslim balance within the country in addition to disallowing men and children from neighboring countries to hold the Lebanese nationality – again, for political reasons.

### **Recent Study with Women Candidates of the 2018 Elections**

Two major happenings that stirred interest in the topic of women's participation in the parliament in Lebanon were the 2018 parliamentary election and the October 2019 uprisings. The first witnessed a surge in the number of women candidates in comparison with previous elections and the second witnessed a huge presence of women in the streets who were able to play major roles during the unfolding of these events.

While this thesis, which was inspired by these events, was being written, a study on women's participation in the parliament in Lebanon was issued. In 2020, an online report was published titled "Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation: Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections," funded by UN

Women and conducted by Dr. Halime El Kaakour. In 2021, El Kaakour published her book that is based on this report, titled “Journey to the Parliament: The Experiences of Lebanese Women in the Parliamentary Election 2018.”

At the signing of this book which took place on April 12, 2021, El Kaakour mentioned that Lebanon lacks a lot of recent studies on several issues especially on women’s participation in the parliament. Her book is based on data provided by 75 women candidates who ran for the 2018 parliamentary election. The purpose of it was to “capture the experiences, thoughts, reviews, motivation and challenges of women candidates” (El Kaakour, 2021, p. 7).

If this thesis was published before this book, it would have been the first study to address this topic after the 2018 parliamentary elections. Yet this thesis remains methodologically different in that it does not only focus on women candidates but women activists in general. Among these activists are women who are previous candidates and women who are not. Also, some of these activists have political aspirations while others don’t. In addition, this study provides a comparative approach between the academic literature of researchers and academics who address this topic and the perspective of in-the-field women activists.

As such, the published book reflects the thoughts and challenges of women candidates specifically and the challenges they face as candidates. This thesis addressed a different sample and attempted to understand the opinions of women activists, some of whom had such an experience and some of whom hadn’t. The common point among the participants of this thesis is that they are activists who support women’s rights and are politically engaged. These are key stakeholders that are at the frontlines of defending

women's political participation in several fields especially the political one. They know the history of women's struggles in the country. They know what women face in both the private and public spheres. Not including their opinions on the topic of women in the parliament constitutes a major gap.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review had two purposes. First it showed that when trying to assess the low presence of Lebanese women in the formal political sphere, several aspects should be taken into consideration. These social, economic, political, structural, and religious factors undermine the ability of Lebanese women to be economically independent, free to take personal decisions, capable of inducing change, lead in key positions, and be treated as a full-fledged citizens under the law. They prevent them from penetrating the solid patriarchal structure which strives on notions of power balance among sectarian communities. This makes it legally, religiously and politically hard for Lebanese women to induce drastic change, enter the political game, and be leaders to their society.

Second it showed that although the literature covers several aspects of the topic, it does not study in-depth the point of view of women activists who are key stakeholders in this matter. Further studies with Lebanese women activists are needed to enrich the literature on Lebanese women's participation in the parliament. The most recent study on this topic addresses the concerns of Lebanese women candidates based on their experiences in the 2018 elections. Thus it examines the position of a specific group in comparison with the sample of this thesis. An example of a difference between the challenges that a candidate faces vs. that of an activist who hasn't ran for elections yet is

that the first might face a challenge in funding her political campaign while the second might consider paying the electoral fees in the first place a challenge in itself.

Accordingly, asking Lebanese women activists about their position regarding this topic based on their experiences and involvement in the field remains an important step to enrich the literature on Lebanese women in the parliament. These are key stakeholders that are at the frontlines of defending women's political participation. They might differ in their political aspirations, as in some might want to run for elections while other don't, but their commonness is that they know the history of women's struggles in the country and the challenges that they face. More importantly, they look at things more closely because of their direct involvement and personal experiences.

The next chapter will present the long history of women activism in Lebanon to show that they are not newcomers in the fields of activism and politics. This gives them the ability to address the topic of women in the parliament on the basis that they are directly involved in several topics related to women in Lebanon and know the obstacles and challenges these women face. It will show that Lebanese women activists have a comprehensive understanding on women's issues in the country based on both the experiences of a long list of prominent women activists in the Lebanese history as well as their direct involvement and personal experiences.

# **Chapter Three**

## **The History of Lebanese Women's Political Activism**

This chapter has three purposes. The first is to present the long history of women activism in Lebanon and to show that Lebanese women activists have been on the ground for decades. This means that they are not newcomers into the field of politics. They've taken the streets long before the October 2019 uprisings and have stood against the system for tens of years. They have a rich history of achievements and struggles which provides them with a deep understanding of the challenges and obstacles that Lebanese women face in all areas including the political one.

The second purpose is to provide a background on the activism of the activists who participated in this thesis, specifically about the reasons behind their participation in the uprisings of October 2019. This will reflect their level of knowledge and involvement in the political arena. It will provide an evidence on why the opinion of Lebanese women activists not only matters but is also legitimate. It is built on their direct involvement with the government, society, international players, laws and all dynamics related to the presence of women in the parliament. As such, Lebanese women activists have a comprehensive understanding on women's issues in the country based on both the experiences of a long list of women activists in the Lebanese history as well as their direct involvement and personal experiences.

The final purpose is to show that studying the low presence of Lebanese women in the formal political sphere, specifically the parliament, becomes more evidently important when juxtaposed with their high level of participation in the informal political sphere. Throughout their history of activism, they seem to remain confined within the informal sphere which raises further questions on to why haven't their participation transitioned into the key institution for decision-making, the parliament. This supports the claim that further studies on the topic are needed.

A historical overview of Lebanese women's political activism shows that they are strong defenders of their rights. Their lack of political participation has always been specific to the formal political sphere. Lebanese women have long been present in the informal sphere. They took the streets as early as the 1950s for the purpose of defending their political rights. Before that, they were also active in ensuring social rights and in advancing organizations for different charitable and social causes. After that, they continued to exhibit interest in civil society movements but remained majorly confined to humanitarian and social work. In this sense, although Lebanese women play a considerable role in civil society and the private sector, their numbers remain very low in regard to their entry into the formal political arena (Kingston, et al., 2011).

The number of registered female candidates during the latest parliamentary elections in 2018 set a precedent. The total number reached 113 and 86 women made it to the candidates' lists, compared to 12 women in 2009 elections (Jacinto, 2018). Yet this increase did not result in much change within the parliament with 6 instead of 4 women out of 128 MPs. So, despite running for elections, women's participation remained low.

In order to map the historical background of Lebanese women's political activism within a context that incorporates both local and external dynamics, the chapter employs the "waves" framework for three reasons. Waves of feminism are divided into sets of years and are defined along thematic achievements. In addition, since they are divided according to historical junctures, waves of Lebanese feminism incorporate local and international events that affected their development.

### **First Phase of Lebanese Women Activism**

An interactive timeline on the website of the Civil Society Knowledge Center (CSKC) illustrates a brief on these four waves and how they developed amid historical political events. The first wave spans between the late 1940s, after independence, and the 1960s. It focused on securing for women the right for education and the right to vote. As Stephan (2014) explains, the first wave of feminism was affected by several external and local factors namely the enlightenment movement in Europe and the emergence of Western missionaries. Both events brought about new ideas and mindsets that encouraged education for women and supported notions of liberalism. In this sense, Lebanon has never been an isolated island even at that time when no Internet or social media existed. Its geographical position plays a major role of course.

Back to the significance of the first wave of feminism, its main focus was to give women the right to vote. The fact that it happened during the time that Lebanon acquired its independence highlights the importance of the effect of political dynamics in shaping social movements. As explained in the history of the women's movement in Lebanon (n.d.), feminists during this period focused on political rights "as they connected the country's independence with the possibility of acquiring new rights and freedoms for

women.” As such, we can conclude that strong political advancements that take place within a state affect the level of consciousness of a certain marginalized group – women in this case.

A key feature of this movement was the fact that it was led by a group of elite women and men (Stephan, 2014) and in 1952, one of its major achievements was pushing the Lebanese parliament to grant the right to vote only to educated women (Khalaf, 2010). On November 4, 1952, President at the time Camille Chamoun passed Decree no. 6 that stated “women educated at the primary level or holding equivalent certificates were granted the right to vote and be elected to any public office” (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.).

As such, in addition to the existing political and sectarian segregations at the time, women themselves were divided between educated and uneducated. And although this group of elites were fighting to educate all women, there remained an inclination to divide along this line. As Khalaf (2010) further explains, it was only until 1953 when the Lebanese Women's Council or LCW was formally established, that all Lebanese women gained the right to vote. However, voting remained optional for women while compulsory for men until 1957 when this distinction was removed (Political rights of women in member nations of the United Nations, 1963). Moreover, the council abided by the sectarian obligations that dominate the political system by alternating its leadership between Christian and Muslim (Daou, 2015).

Despite the united efforts to achieve this goal, and reflecting a continuous course of sectarian troubles in Lebanon, the LCW was not immune to these divisions. It included 170 NGOs that were mainly established along confessional lines which

resulted in diverting the council from its main goal of leading a Lebanese feminist movement to providing social services for women (Women's Movements in Lebanon, n.d.). This scenery is not much different from the current one.

As initially mentioned, such a historical background on the formation of women's movements in politics, the obstacles they faced, and their achievements helps in bringing to the front the shared traits of pre- and post- October 17's status quo of Lebanese women's political activities. In other words, it sheds light on both the weaknesses and strengths of Lebanese women's groups that are recurring at several political junctures maybe due to actions of women themselves or to external dynamics related to the country.

Also, as is the case today, the fact that women achieved suffrage did not or has not translated into good representation of females in the formal political sphere, i.e. the parliament. Not in the past and not until now that women achieved major presence as members of parliaments. During the period following this achievement the bulk of Lebanese women's activities remained confined to the charitable work of NGOs. Of course, few exceptions existed.

Between the years 1953 and 1975, the country held six parliamentary elections with only three women running for seats (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.). The first women to run in 1953 was one of the LCW's founders, feminist Emily Fares Ibrahim, but she did not win a seat (Stephan, 2014). On the other hand, daughter of Member of Parliament at the time Myrna Boustani was the first to win a seat. In 1963, after the death of her father, she won his seat but only after running for it unopposed to continue his term after his death (Khalaf, 2010). Again, a similar narrative

in the contemporary history of Lebanese women in the parliament. Daughters, wives, or sisters of male MPs win a seat only to carry on the legacies of their fathers, husbands, or brothers.

The fact that the first wave of feminism took place between the 1940s and 1960s, during a time in which Lebanon was undergoing significant political transformations and several internal and external factors were at play, highlights the effect of such factors on domestic demands. It can be said that women at the time rode the wave of change and placed their rights within a set of political demands that were taking place.

A quick comparison with the latest uprisings of October 17 shows how women during these protests attempted to ride the current wave of change and take the opportunity to re-voice their demands. This does not mean that women activists are generally silent and only get to work during national protests. Especially in Lebanon, women groups are in continuous effort to lobby for amending laws and protecting women. But this comparison aims at shedding light on the fact that during national protests or uprisings, when the system is challenged and the government is opposed, women activists gain a rare opportunity to face a stiff system and to feel a widespread support to their demands.

This means that during such times, when different groups are demanding different or similar rights, when the media is there to cover the events, when everyone is watching or reading the news and following what's going on, women groups get active to make sure their demands are included in the basket of demands. Hoping, maybe, that when the system seems to be listening to the people, their voices get heard too. In the

first wave of feminism, this worked and women got their right to vote and their right for education.

## **Second Phase of Lebanese Women Activism**

Waves never cease to hit the shore. Nor do they cease to shape everything they hit including stones and rocks. But some waves hit higher and splash harder reaching an extended distance than usual. So are women movements. They do not cease to exist but at certain periods their work reaches higher peaks and their efforts achieve substantial accomplishments.

The second substantial wave of Lebanese feminism extended between the years 1967 and 1995 (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.) including thus the years of the Lebanese Civil War. Reading the history of this period highlights its profound political nature even before the Civil War. As Stephan (2014) describes it, “[t]he second wave of feminism was born in a climate filled with political tension, which left its mark on its mission and self-understanding.” That is because it began in parallel with the defeat of Arabs in the Six-Days War and continued to develop amidst a domestic and regional war at a later stage.

In this sense, women groups during this period struggled to define their scope of work, their identity, their aims and strategies. More fundamental is that their demand for rights was marginalized due to political and security priorities. As one can foresee, even before telling the story of the second phase of Lebanese feminism, in a country where there are always political, economic, and security issues at stake, women’s rights tend to be frequently marginalized, dismissed or postponed.

As Stephan (2012) narrates, the roots of women groups that were established between the 1960s and 1970s were within socialist ideologies and political parties. This is no surprise since this period witnessed a noteworthy expansion of leftist ideas and groups. Out of these groups, several women's organizations were born, including the Women's Democratic Gathering and the League of Lebanese Women's Rights. The influence of socialism on Lebanese feminists of that era is notable. Examples of women organizations that emerged during this period include the Lebanese Democratic Gathering of Women (affiliated with the Organization of Communist Action), the Progressive Women's Union (affiliated with the Progressive Socialist Party), and the League of Lebanese Women's Rights (Women's movements in Lebanon, n.d.). Although these groups were considered to have a political nature or political aim regarding the defense of women's rights they remained confined to charity work and later to the negotiation of peace and reconciliation. Yet not to be very pessimistic, this period did also witness important progress regarding women's rights.

When the Civil War erupted, it hurdled the work of women groups in the country. For example, the Lebanese Women's Council (LCW) became inactive during this period (Stephan, 2012, p. 116). The work of women's organizations that were established to defend rights and call for equality soon became focusing on helping with issues arising from refugees and war victims (Women's movements in Lebanon, n.d.). As Charafeddine (2009) describes it, the Civil War drastically affected the second phase of Lebanese feminism in that it "drove the women's movement back to pastoral functions which it had already begun to relinquish" (p.12). This means that after women groups had evolved from their earlier nature of being charity organizations into

politically involved advocacy groups that achieved suffrage to everyone, the war came to drive them back to their initial practices thus distracting them from their political work.

But not all women-related advocacy stopped. The most prominent name in this field was lawyer Laure Moghaizel. According to Stephan (2010), Moghaizel played a major role in transforming the activism of Lebanese women into a modern political movement and in institutionalizing it by contributing to the establishment of the LCW and later on the Lebanese Association for Human Rights with her husband Joseph (p. 533). Stephan (2010) elaborates well on the accomplishments of this couple and their ability to empower each other and defend their beliefs. Together they were able to amend several laws that impacted the lives of Lebanese women. These include the elimination of legal punishments for the use of contraceptives in 1983, the granting of Lebanese women the right to practice commerce without obtaining the consent of their husbands in 1994, securing the right for women to keep their Lebanese citizenship and their job upon marrying foreign men also in 1994, in addition to others (p. 538). The work of this woman had a major impact on the lives of Lebanese women today. It can be seen from her work that her aim was to establish an encompassing state of equality between men and women and among women themselves.

Among her great achievements as well was the initiation of a clause in the Lebanese constitution that highlighted the country's commitment to the International Declaration of Human Rights (Women's movements in Lebanon, n.d.). As a couple, the Moghaizels still stand as an example for the power of mutual empowerment between men and women. Especially that their work was during a conflictual time in the

Lebanese history during which everyone was distracted by political, economic and security issues.

The second phase of Lebanese feminism was not an easy journey. The fact that it coincided with the Civil War had several negative effects. The war marginalized women's issues and put them aside. Groups that worked on women's rights had to shift focus and help in decreasing the impact of the bloody events. The individual efforts that tried to maintain the modest momentum of the women's movement demanded high level of commitment, patience and hard work.

An important note to be mentioned is the fact that the international sphere assisted in keeping women's rights on the agenda since several global conferences took places during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These include the World Conference on Women in Mexico, 1975 and the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace in Nairobi, 1985 (Women's Movements in Lebanon, n.d.). But a main issue remained: female identity remained tied to national identity and political parties integrated their priorities into the priorities of feminist movements (Daou, 2015), thus undermining their independence from sectarian and political divisions.

### **Third Phase of Lebanese Women Activism**

In fact, these previously mentioned international efforts exerted to raise awareness on women's rights played a major role in the initiation of the third cycle of Lebanese feminism. Following the Mexico and Nairobi conferences, the Fourth World Conference on Women which was held in Beijing, 1995 marked a significant milestone

in removing the distinction between women's and men's rights by asserting that women's rights are human rights and demanding that member nations be committed to respecting these rights (Stephan, 2014). Such an international sphere was certainly important to enhance local recognition of women's rights and hold countries accountable regarding the advancement of these issues.

With the emergence of the third wave of Lebanese feminism new terms were introduced to the vocabulary of activists. They became more aware of concepts such as gender-based violence and full citizenship (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.). Efforts began addressing legal reforms to enhance the status of women especially in laws that affected their daily lives. A celebrated achievement that resulted from a collaborative work between lawyer Laure Moghaizel and her husband Joseph Moghaizel was the pressuring of the Lebanese government to sign and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), despite with some reservations (Stephan 2010, p. 539). These reservations reflect the strict level of patriarchal resistance that controls the state and rejects all reforms that might undermine existing sectarian structures that reinforce men's power and limit that of women.

In addition, efforts began to address the need to establish entities entitled to oversee the implementation of activities related to gender equality. In fact, it was international recommendations that required such measures. The main organizations that emerged during this period include the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), the National Committee for the Follow Up of Women's Issues and the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (The history of the women's movement in Lebanon, n.d.). This network of organizations shared the mission of

promoting women's rights and participation on the political, social, and economic levels, to facilitate the presence of women in the public sphere (Stephan 2012, p. 122).

A notable change that was introduced by women's rights advocates during the third phase was the focus on personal problems that Lebanese women faced in their households and within their families. Attention was directed towards the personal and not only the political. So in addition to the fight for more rights and better laws, activists brought the issues of domestic violence against women, rape and honor killing into discussion. In parallel with the international trend, the third wave of Lebanese feminism attempted to put these so-called taboo topics on the public agenda. According to Stephan (2014), in the year 1997 the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LCRVAW) was established. The council lobbied politicians and provided hotlines and legal counseling. In her words, such initiatives "made the personal political" by discussing domestic violence and issues of sexuality within the public sphere.

In summary, this phase of feminism witnessed two main developments. Both were affected by a rise of an international consciousness that stressed on the need to prioritize women's rights and guide countries through the implementation of laws that protect them. The first development was the increase in the number of NGOs and organizations specialized not only in organizing activities addressing women's issues but also in monitoring advancements in this field and making sure laws are implemented. A side effect of this NGOization is the need for funds from donors which as Daou (2015) explains, caused disagreement and rivalry within these organizations and among them. The adoption of donor priorities launched NGOs into frantic competition and helped deflect their objectives. The second development touched the

topics that women advocacy groups tackled. They touched onto the personal challenges that women face and were considered as taboo. In this sense the new face of Lebanese feminism was more globalized, modern, advanced and structured.

### **Fourth Phase of Lebanese Women Activism**

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked the birth of a fourth generation of Lebanese feminism. This generation delved into more specific topics and expanded their list of demands. In general, it followed-up with the international trends and challenged additional taboos within the Lebanese society. As a continuity to the third phase, women activists during this period focused more on personal decisions of women and their right to take decisions on matters related to their bodies, sexualities, reproduction, and any issue considered to be personal to a woman herself. In a sense, this generation of advocates worked on empowering women by attempting to give them control over their private issues and concerns. Of course, such empowerment is a derivative of the persistent lobbying for improved economic and political statuses of Lebanese women.

The emergence of facilitated communications at this time also affected the ease of exchange of ideas and concerns between the local and international communities working on women's issues. This implies the emergence of the Internet and later on Social Media. This exchange long existed and its effects were manifested in previous waves of Lebanese feminism as well. But this wave witnessed a rapid change in communication methods which resulted in the spread of diverse discourses and increased awareness. Soon women's rights groups were also lobbying for other minority groups and oppressed entities such as domestic or immigrant workers.

As Stephan (2014) explains, organizations that emerged during the fourth phase of feminism focused on “protesting the vulnerability of its victims in the legal system.” A notable NGO that emerged during this phase, specifically in 2005, is KAFA (enough) Violence & Exploitation which, according to its website, is a Lebanese, feminist, non-profit civil society organization that aims at eliminating all forms of violence, exploitation and discrimination against women, domestic workers, and children. KAFA does so by working on the psychological, social and legal aspects of these problems (About KAFA, n.d.). In 2007 KAFA presented a draft law on the protection of violence against women. It was only until 2014 that the campaign was able to mobilize supporters for this reform and pressured the parliament to pass it. In the opinion of Daou (2015), although the law was passed, the version adopted had a patriarchal touch.

In 2009, another group emerged called Nasawiya. According to Daou (2015), they considered themselves as different to previous and existing feminist movements in Lebanon in that they adopted an intersectional discourse. In this sense, they focused on identity politics, specifically sexual identity, and shifted to a far extent from the political context within which they exist. As Daou (2015) further concludes, Nasawiya failed to translate its claims into a theoretical framework and failed to mobilize around a clearly defined cause which led to its disintegration in 2012.

Another key advancement that has been worked on during the fourth wave is the issue of Lebanese women being unable to pass their nationality to their children. A woman married to a foreign man cannot give the Lebanese citizenship neither to her children nor to her husband. This issue persists until now despite the campaigns that have been designed to lobby for the amending of the Nationality Law in the country.

Two main entities that focused their efforts on this cause are the National Coalition to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination against Women and the Lebanese Women's Network under the leadership of the CRTD-A (Stephan 2012, p. 125-126). Although many of the demands that women call for end up hurdled by political or structural powers, as the literature explains, the nationality issue remains among the most vetoed due to sectarian and demographic concerns within the country.

### **Lebanese Women during October 17, 2019 Uprisings**

Lebanese women's activism never ceased to exist. At times it remained confined to the work of NGOs and civil society organizations. But in times of political unrest, women activists do not miss an opportunity to take the streets and publicly voice their demands. Their participation in the latest uprisings of October 17, 2019 resembles a key example of the eagerness of Lebanese women to be part of the political process in the country. When the people of Lebanon took the streets to demand change, women took the streets as well and not only protested for their rights and demands but even played leadership roles in managing the uprisings.

The unfolding events have been described as "women-led protests" (Elbasnaly and Knipp, 2019). Women from different regions, backgrounds, and ages played different roles in assisting the protestors, voicing demands, shedding light on pressing issues and uncovering corruption within the political structure. Participation of Lebanese women varied in nature. Some devoted their kitchens and resources to cook for the protestors and provide them with meals. Others organized activities to raise awareness and recruit support on women's issues and rights. Groups of women formed buffer zones between protestors and the police to decrease tension and violent occurrences.

They appeared on TVs and expressed their anger and concerns. They used the opportunity to address the wider community about their efforts and goals.

In the words of activist Rand Hammoud, Lebanese women were not afraid to take the streets and were not scared from teargas bombs. But mostly importantly, she adds, they will fight when they challenge their right to govern Lebanon in the future. And on this points she elaborates, “The feminist bloc has always had an important role in Lebanon’s civil society,” (as cited in Caramazza, 2019). In other words, the protests provided women with new spaces to express their voices. They want to contribute to the structuring and governing of a new Lebanon. Their presence in the protests gave them access to areas that are seemingly confined to patriarchal structures. When women occupied the streets and led the events, this resulted in an increased social acceptance of women’s political engagement (Wilson, Zabaneh, & Dore-Weeks, 2019). In fact, their unique participation and leadership capabilities stood as remarkable inspiration for women in the Arab world too (Elbasnaly and Knipp, 2019).

Of course, these actions and achievements did not pass by without confrontation from the patriarchal network that has long aimed to keep the feminine voice shut. Women activists faced several hardships ranging from objectification of their pictures during the protests to intimidation and sexist remarks both in person and on social media platforms. As mentioned in the UN Women’s report, women faced widespread sexism and direct bullying since the early days of the demonstrations as well as cyber-bullying especially on posts that included their political opinions (Wilson, Zabaneh, & Dore-Weeks, 2019). This is not surprising within a community that considers women as subordinate to men and seeks the most ridicule excuses to criticize women and

delegitimize their presence, especially the political one. These excuses include their unacceptable outfits, their disrespectful outrage, their decreased femininity and their disobedience to the demands of their males' guardians.

When comparing the amount of pressure that women faced and the amount of effort they put to rise above all forms of disparagement, it becomes clearer that Lebanese women not only have the political will to be present but to fight for their presence and prove their efficiency and productivity. Lebanese women proved that they are not indifferent to politics and to the economic, social, and political problems hitting on the country. On the contrary they were "on front lines of protests" (Lewis, 2019) and knew well about the corruption, the problems, and the solutions. More importantly, the high number of women who participated in those uprisings and their diverse forms of engagement "reflect Lebanon's longstanding and vibrant civil society and history of women's rights and feminist activism" (Wilson, Zabaneh, & Dore-Weeks, 2019).

### **About the Interviewees: Why did they participate in the latest Protests?**

The first question addressed to the interviewees was regarding their recent participation in the 2019 protests and uprisings. They were asked to explain the reasons behind their participation. The interviewees answered this question based on their participation as citizens in general, and as women in specific. Everyone agreed that the main reasons for them to participate stemmed from the fact that they are citizens who are not satisfied with the status quo of their country. So the participation of these activists in the latest protests was based on their dissatisfaction with corruption, lack of services, absence of basic rights, absence of government, favoritism, patronage, the

consociational system and instability. As one of the participants said, “I have been active in politics for the past five years. I was longing for this to happen.” These activists have long been unsatisfied with the situation in the country and the level of corruption that swept through its system. Their list of demands included the establishment of a civil law country, better taxation system, a mechanism for budgeting, efficient hospitalization programs, and a solution for the trash crisis. In brief, the establishment of a strong government that is capable of meeting the needs of its citizens.

The answers of the participants reflected their frustration with the accumulation of corruption in the country to a point where such a revolt was much needed. As one of the interviewees narrates, “On the night of October 17, I was so sick. I was thinking how the government not only was keen to steal us, but was also considering to add taxes on an inherently free international service, WhatsApp. I heard that protests are taking place. I couldn’t help myself. I took my medications and went down the streets. I was provoked. I felt my brain as a human being is being insulted. My dignity is being insulted.”

It was clear that these women activists had concerns that transcended their issues as women only. Not only they were aware of the social, economic, and political issues that this country is suffering from, but they have long longed to witness change and be part of it. As N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) explains, “I’ve been an activist since 1998. In 2013, I demonstrated against the extension for the parliament and I ran for elections. Between 2015 and 2016, I was among those who organized the “Badna Nhaseb” movement. In 2018, I re-ran for parliamentary elections. The 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019 was a buildup of events. Especially for me. I have never left

the streets. Four days before October 17 I was demonstrating. On that day, it was a Thursday, I was attending a seminar in Tripoli when I knew that protests are taking place. I arrived at Sayfeh and joined the protests. I participated as a citizen suffering from all the problems. I want change. Especially the sectarian political system.”

All participants confirm that their initial motivation to participate in the protests wasn't directly related to a feminist agenda. They want a better country. They are fed up with the corrupt system. Their demand for change embraced a large umbrella of reforms. “The first ten titles for the protests didn't include anything specifically related to gender,” says one interviewee. “The night on which October 17 protests began, the demands were related to citizen rights and the state of citizenship,” adds another. As Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) puts it, “There has been a deadlock on all levels. The authorities have long been violating the laws and regulations. The system isn't meeting the needs of the people.”

As the protests unfolded, feminist and gender equality agendas surfaced. Despite the fact that people were protesting for their citizen rights, “We saw awareness about gender equality issues,” said an interviewee. Speeches started addressing ideas and topics. And among these were topics related to the status of women in Lebanon and the reforms that must be addressed to achieve gender equality. As Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) puts it, “feminist groups, some of which formed along with the protests, set the speech and were thorough about their demands. Women's rights were part of these protests and I am glad that the public is aware of them.”

The gradual manifestation of women's rights that came in parallel with the evolution of the protests reflects the notion that they are an intrinsic part of human rights in general. Although activists assured that the initial catalyst to their participation in the protests is related to their general frustration with the country's corrupt system, some leaned more towards women's rights groups when those started to show, while others continued with the broad agenda they were carrying in the streets.

This was evident through the answers of the interviewees. When asked about their participation as women in these protests, some interviewees directly delved into a list of demands that concerned them as feminist groups in the uprisings. It reflects the issues carried by the feminist agenda which surfaced as part of the broader scene. "Women have been always asking for a civil law, removal of discrimination, and their right to give nationality," said an interviewee. "In fact, women want the implementation of the excluded articles of CEDAW. The demands include terminating Kafala System, securing sexual freedom, rights of minorities, rights of migrant workers, domestic workers, groups with different sexual orientations, and refugees. These protests weren't elitist. They addressed daily life demands. Human rights cannot be fragmented based on what complies with our mentality. Irrespective if you agree, you should support all human rights," she added. Within the same context, another interviewee expressed her disapproval of the existing patriarchal system and its effect on the political career of women. "This system and the absence of a civil law, instead of the current personal status law, prevent women from reaching higher political positions," she explained.

Another group of interviewees did not reflect such a thorough feminist stance when it came to their participation in the protests. They described their participation as

one calling for a general advancement within society. To this group, both men and women are lacking a set of their basic needs. To them, a huge group of citizens lack representation for their visions, aspirations and basic rights. Their approach stressed on the intersectionality of issues that are related to political change, social change and social justice. “The new wave of feminism does not support the fragmentation of these issues. But they should be gender sensitive,” said one interviewee. As she explained, “During the protests, there were traditional thinkers who called for political change. They called for a minor change in the political system. Another group, which was a minority, called for a social change and revolted against social norms and notions. Women’s rights are part of this social change. Women’s issues are reached along this progress. You can have political change without reaching social change. And that’s why a democratic system doesn’t mean there are women’s rights.”

These answers reflect two approaches to women’s rights within the context of the protests that began in 2019. One approach is demonstrative of a feminist agenda that covers a wide spectrum of demands beginning with the personal issues, such as sexual orientation and freedom, reaching to the presence of women in leadership positions. The second approach maintains a perspective that both men’s and women’s rights are not represented within the current system. As one interviewee puts it, “As a woman, my rights come within a package of rights as a citizen. Basic services and a good salary, for example. As for the political dimension, people have the right to have representation of their visions and aspirations. There’s lack of representation in general plus lack of representation of women’s issues. All citizens are lacking their basic rights.”

## Conclusion

Despite minor progress, Lebanese women are increasingly absent from the formal political arena. Historically, they haven't exceeded 5% of the parliamentary seats. This absence has left Lebanon ranking on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index as 145th out of 152 countries (El Kaakour, 2020). Among the criteria that the index takes into consideration is women's political empowerment within the country. As defined by the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, this sub-index measures "the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in ministerial positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions" in addition to the "ratio of women to men in terms of years in executive office" (Insight Report Global Gender Gap Report 2020, 2019, p. 47). It is clear that along this definition Lebanon hasn't achieved noticeable progress to allow for an acceptable ratio of women to men in decision-making positions. In fact, Lebanon ranks at position 149 out of 152 countries under the sub-index of Political Empowerment (p. 219). As such, the posed question becomes why have Lebanese women's activism, efforts, achievements, and progress been majorly confined within the informal political sphere, i.e. on the streets, in NGOs, and within civil society.

This chapter showed that Lebanese women activists have long been involved in different aspects of political work. They carry the knowledge of their ancestors as well as their own experiences in the field. As such, these players should be asked about the reasons behind this gap and the factors that they consider as leading to this status quo. Their input covers a compilation of past, present and future concerns.

The next chapter compiles the answers of Lebanese women activists who discussed questions on the factors behind the low presence of women in the parliament in Lebanon. It will present the perspective of Lebanese women activists on this matter to allow for a final conclusion that checks on what were the points that they shared with the academic literature and what were additional concerns that they added to it.

## **Chapter Four**

# **What are, in the opinion of Lebanese Women Activists, the Factors behind the Low Representation of Women in the Parliament?**

This chapter asks Lebanese women activists about their opinions regarding the factors that are affecting the presence of women in the Lebanese parliament. It begins with asking them about the extent to which they consider women as represented in the Lebanese parliament. Then it continues with discussions about the reasons that these interviewees consider as hindering Lebanese women's progress and participation in the formal political sector, specifically the parliament.

### **How well represented are Women in the Lebanese Parliament**

Answers to this question tackled two aspects of the issue of representation. One is based on the actual number of females who have seats in the parliament. The other addresses the representation of women's rights, whether by a male or female Member of Parliament. The latter aspect was of more concern to the participants. They all agreed on the fact that the number of Lebanese women in the parliament is obviously low and that it should be increased. They also agreed that certain mechanisms, which will be later discussed, must be installed to increase the presence of women in this institution and their presence in the formal political sphere in general. They confirmed the need to see more women within this sector.

But the bigger concern of the activists was related to the fact that neither men nor women, who are currently members of the parliament, advocate for women's rights or carry a feminist agenda. Interviewees in both groups gave the example when the government recently announced a list of subsidized commodities. The list included men's razors but did not include sanitary pads. They expressed their frustration that very few paid attention to this matter and to the issue of Period Poverty in general, even involved women. "We don't mind being represented by either a man or a woman, as long as they represent a feminist agenda and support women's rights," said a participant. "There's a certain level of ignorance and lack of representation, despite the actual presence of women," added another.

Accordingly, the problem of women's representation in the parliament exists on two levels. Their low presence within the formal process of parliamentary elections and accordingly their low share of seats. In addition to the absence of supporters to their demands in the parliament, from both genders. As N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) puts it, "Since women secured their right to vote and run for elections, their presence in the parliament has generally been part of formalities related to the absence of either their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Examples include Nayla Mawad, Nayla Touwayni, Bahia Hariri, Mirna Boustani, Solange Gemmayel, Sitrida Geagea, and others. They don't represent me as a woman. They represent their political parties. They do not advocate for or work on gender equality. They weren't elected because they carried the issues of women. They don't even call for quota. Even Paula Yacoubian wasn't elected because she is a woman but because she was part of a political party. Same for Joumana Haddad. Their groups supported them.

So when it comes to the representation of women in the parliament, there's no representation on two levels. First at the level of candidacy. And second the women who are in the parliament don't work for woman."

Related to this answer is the comment of one of the participants in the focus groups who said, "In general, it's hard for independent candidates to win. Whether men or women. That's why Paula Yacoubian was able to win, because of politics and money. While Laure Moghaizel, who has long been working as an activist, did not win, despite support of civil society."

The next sections will discuss the reasons behind the low representation of women in the parliament. Within the context of this study, representation still relates to the number of women participating in the formal political sphere. What is hindering Lebanese women from running as candidates during elections? What are the factors leading to this low count of Lebanese women in the parliament? The answers to these questions will allow for the formation of an answer to this study's question: what are in the opinion of Lebanese women the factors behind their low representation in the parliament and how do they stand vis-à-vis the arguments present in the literature?

## **Factors behind Low Presence of Lebanese Women in Parliament**

### **Cultural Notions and Practices**

The answers to the question on the social reasons behind the low presence of women in the parliament varied based on the personal experiences of the interviewees. The importance of the group interviews in allowing for the exchange of points of views was evident during the discussion on this question. In addition, the experiences of the

interviewees added several angles to this topic. This section and the ones that follow represent a brainstorming session full of headlines that must be further studied and addressed.

To begin with the wide umbrella of patriarchy, which is the first word that women use when addressing the social issues that affect their roles, D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) believes that both men and women are responsible for the existence of this structure. As she explains, “Men possess this power and they wouldn’t want to give it up. But some women raise their children based on patriarchal notions. For example, if they should select who will receive education, the priority is for the boy. At home, the girl is asked to serve her brother; to bring him his glass of water. The son has legitimacy to allow or forbid his mother to leave the house. So the girl is raised within an environment where she’s in a weaker position. Her father or brother are responsible of her. So these women who absorb these patriarchal thoughts will choose to stay away from politics because it’s a problematic field. These women do not even believe in notions of gender equality. We need time to convince them with these notions and women’s rights.” By this, gender discrimination becomes a result of how generations are raised.

From these practices stems the notion of gender division of roles. Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) addresses this issue and considers that gender roles are bestowed upon men and women from the moment they are born. “There are expectations regarding the roles that each should play. This is then reflected within society. There’s a social division affected by the division of gender roles. Unconsciously, a girl will believe that politics is not her field. In addition, we raise boys

to be confident and to speak up. Confidence is a matter of how we raise the children. That's why, in business meetings for example, men take the lead while women are more conservative. She doesn't speak unless she's sure about what she's going to say.”

Accordingly, these two viewpoints that complement each other imply that women who are raised on these patriarchal conceptions are themselves reinforcing these notions by passing them to their children, whether boys or girls. The boy is raised with a belief that he is powerful and strong. Political work is among the options for his career. The girl is raised to believe that she is weak and in constant need for support and protection. Based on her assigned gender roles, politics is not an option. “We are born within a defined framework. We reproduce this model and few break away from it,” says an interviewee. “We also need to challenge our friends, schools, and wider community on what they implant in the minds of our kids,” she adds.

This framework that dictates roles based on gender affects the perception of society regarding women's participation in the political sphere. She's neither expected nor accepted to be part of the political process. As one interviewee explains, “If a woman decides to run for elections, even on a municipal level, the first question addressed to her is whether there aren't any men in the family to do so. And if she continues as a candidate, the second question becomes how she will manage between her duties at home and her political work.” “As if we ask men this question!” she exclaims. So it is expected from women to prioritize their familial duties on their career aspirations. Because based on the existing division of gender roles, men are not responsible for helping with the household duties. As another participant clarifies, “Men are allowed to follow their dreams. Women are primarily responsible for the household.

You are allowed to work but the priority is for your husband and kids. Your personal dreams come next including a political career.”

N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) narrates her personal experience with social obstacles that face a woman who chooses to take a political path. “I came from a nonpolitical family that is against political work. When I was a university student, I joined a leftist political party. My parents were bullied and my friends’ parents forbade them from talking to me. I was treated as a disease. Especially that I lived in a rural area, not in the city, so people know each other well. To them, a woman who chooses to join politics will not get married because she is too strong that no man will want to marry her. The life of this woman changes a lot. Especially if she chooses a political party other than that followed by her surroundings. If she joins the same party as theirs, at least she’ll stay under their sight. A lot of my friends tried to continue but they backed and settled and got married. It’s so hard to continue because you face a lot of pressure and harassment. You feel fear. It’s very important that a woman’s family and friends support her because she will face a lot of pressure and she will need to talk. When in university, the girl’s experience is still narrow. She will have few references of women in the political work. Most of my friends back then joined social work groups related to the environment and charity. Only two chose political parties.”

She stresses on the effect of the surrounding environment and the effect of the family’s role in these cases when girls choose political careers or join political activities. She gives examples of cases when men blame their wives for not raising well their girls because they chose to have a political career especially with parties different than the

ones they support. And not only do women face these pressures from the family but they face more issues within the party itself. “The patriarchal mentality exists everywhere. After leaving their families in search for open minds, women get shocked with the amount of harassment they are subject to within the political party especially when there’s competition. You are reduced to the fact that you are a woman and get harassed with rumors. They are not allowed to reach leadership positions. That’s why ethics must go along political work especially during times of competition. We should appreciate women who reach high positions because they go through a lot and they work on themselves a lot, unlike men who face less obstacles.”

### **The Role of Political Parties**

This brings us to a very major obstacle that most of the interviewees address as hindering the presence of women in politics and negatively affecting their representation in the parliament: the role of political parties. The amount of feedback that addressed this issue highlights its significance as one of the main reasons behind the low presence of women as members of parliament. As explained by the participants, political parties have several roles that are necessary for the advancement of women along the political process until reaching the parliament. They constitute the necessary framework within which members gain the training and experience to pursue political work. Also, they provide the budgeting needed to cover electoral expenses during parliamentary elections.

In the opinion of one of the participants in the focus groups, “Currently there are no political parties but revised militias that are based on geographical and sectarian divisions. Within such a framework, there’s no role for women. Although women fought

during the war, they had no roles when the political parties were formed. What parties currently do is that they attract women to fulfill office work which is related to the traditional role of women (organizing, planning, preparing) and not to progress in leadership positions. They drove women out. They assign for them social activities such as planning lunches and events. But when it comes to running candidates for elections, they won't name a woman. So there is already a multi-layered discrimination regarding candidates, related to money, populism, and gender is a layer."

Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) supports this opinion in regard to the nature of the existing political parties. As she explains, "the hereditary leadership positions of parties that emerged during the war have been filled by ex-militia leaders among none of which was a woman. So no woman inherited such a position. Even parties that emerged after the war, followed the same structure which is mainly sectarian." As such, "the current structure gives less opportunity to women to reach the parliament because they have to be within political parties to be able to do so." Then she asks, "Why don't political leaders bequeath their daughters? They bequeath their sons-in-law while women are the last resort." To her, the answer is: "if a woman inherits the position it will be a hit to the patriarchal system."

In this sense, these activists are implying that parties are excluding women from politics because both of structural factors that happened to exist after the war, as well as persistent decisions to avoid a feminine presence within their established patriarchal construction. As previously mentioned, power is within the hands of men and no one would want to give up such a privilege. The status quo that emerged after the war concentrated political power in the hands of a coalition that reinforced the monopoly of

politics by men. In the opinion of one of the participants, “political parties are mean. During the 2018 elections, some parties named women only for seats that were less likely to win. For seats identified as most-likely to win, they named men. Other lists were decorated with names of women who won’t win. They didn’t even nominate partisan women because political parties haven’t trained women to fight in politics. They don’t support quota as well.” According to her, only the Future Movement nominated women to actually compete during the elections. These were Dima Jamali and Rola Tabesh.

So the importance of the role of political parties regarding the participation of women in the parliament lies in the fact that these institutions are responsible for the coordination and management of candidates during elections. They are a main source of both moral and financial support. When they are run by men who seek to reproduce the existing patriarchal structure, the chances for women to penetrate this system become harder. But women need to be part of these institutions to be able to run for elections or win in elections. That’s why interviewees highlighted the fact that women who won during 2018 elections were not independent activists. They were supported and financed by specific political parties. As they mentioned, neither independent men nor independent women have chances to win. On one hand, “Women should climb the ladder of political work. They should be members or heads of syndicates. They have to be involved in political parties to be able to correctly reach the parliament. Parties are not giving women a chance to reach. Despite women’s long history of activism, they don’t give them a chance to reach,” explained an interviewee. On the other hand, “When a candidate is a woman, we ask about her capabilities. Once, when asked about quota,

Naim Qassem answered what if these women aren't competent. But men aren't competent either! In this case, let's nominate both incompetent men and women," exclaimed another interviewee.

This statement represents a wider discussion that was held in one of the focus groups. The interesting thing is that a discussion on the necessity for the competency of women was discussed among women themselves. What about women's capabilities in politics? Can women convince voters to elect them? Do these questions apply on men as well? Are men less assessed, criticized, and tested?

### **Extra Pressure on Women and the Role of Media**

This section will begin with reporting the exact discussion that took place during one of the focus groups among three participants. The purpose is to present the opinions of these women as they are and present the different points of views that they hold. The discussion began when the interviewees were addressed by the question on the social reasons behind the low presence of women in the parliament. The first interviewee said, "If I want to consider myself a citizen or an observer who knows nothing about feminist activism, I would consider that few women were able to create a vision to convince society with. There's no clear vision or agenda. I didn't hear a woman who convinced me. I wouldn't want to elect her just because she is a woman. I want to elect a woman because of her plan."

The second participant replied, "This is one of the media's games. This is one of the traps of the confessional anarchic patriarchal system within which we live. We add on women an extra burden. Women have been active since the thirties and forties. During the last two elections several women had agendas. Examples include Zoya

Rouhana who fought against domestic violence or Lauri Haytanian who worked on the topic of oil and gas. Maybe next elections we'll see more women. But women candidates in general don't have enough money. They lack adequate progression in politics. They lack resources and support from political parties. They face obstacles on several levels including pressure from their husbands and families. Some are threatened with divorce if they run for elections. We are forced to think that a woman must have an agenda to be elected. But with the current electoral law, even if a woman has a program, she won't be able to reach the parliament." Another point that this interviewee addressed is that the media is not trained to deal with women candidates as well. She gave an example of a candidate who was interviewed and the first comment she receives from the host of the program is that she looks so beautiful. She added, "Women are criticized a lot more on their looks. Training is needed to explain that women are not a picture."

The first interviewee added to her point which is related to the lack of a convincing agenda presented by women and said, "The issue facing women is the same as that facing the latest revolution. There's no clear vision, agenda, or depth. People aren't intellectually ready for women's rights as well as the idea of a revolution."

The third interviewee replied, "Of course we need a strategy to achieve our demands. The number of men within groups always exceeds that of women. Maybe you'll find two or three women. We are trying to impose an agenda for women to be politically active. When women talk politics, they are always underestimated. Women's role is not to complement someone. Our aim is bigger than this masculine mentality that considers women as less than men. Even women's families themselves are not

respecting their progress. Even when she's multitasking, she is expected not to fall short with her familial duties because these should be her priorities."

Then the discussion addressed the status of women after the uprisings and after the achievement of the anticipated change. Their concern was related to the role that women will have amidst a possibly new system. "We were present during the revolution. Will they consider women as essential role players? Or will the male-centered mentality rule again? That's the mentality that we are challenging," said one interviewee. She added, "A second obstacle is related to the media. Why doesn't the media highlight the presence of women? Is it because of financial interests? Is it because they support men with the money?"

So the concerns presented in this discussion capture the different points of views related to the concept of electing a woman for political work. What some activists tried to explain is that because of the existing patriarchal system and the beliefs that it nurtures, both women and men tend to add more pressure on women who choose political work. Because we are used to the presence of men in such roles and positions, we do not ask twice if he is capable or not. The fact that he is a man saves him from scrutiny and assessment. But when it comes to women, suddenly we are concerned with their qualifications and competency. Not only that, but we are also concerned with their outfits and what it might reflect of them.

As H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021) puts it, "Cultural stereotypes dictate on women where they can be and where they cannot. Politics is considered as unsuitable for us. We are nice and politics needs strength. Which brings us to the wrong defining of strength and power. In addition, women are

way more judged than men. She's judged on her hair, if it's fixed or not, on her clothes, if they are nice or not. There is much more pressure on women and there's an absence of adequate measurements of competency, both for men and women. There's an absence of a political culture and a set of standards. The existing ones are undemocratic and reflect the lack of awareness." Further to this point, an interviewee also considers that "the media supports gender stereotypes especially ones that reinforce the concept that only women are responsible for household duties."

Regarding this issue, N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) supports the notion that women are held more accountable for what they do or say. Specifically women who decide to run for parliamentary elections. According to her, "When a woman will be interviewed, she gets trained and is sent the questions and the possible topics of discussion. There is fear that she might not know what to talk about regarding all the topics. For men, they won't know what to speak, but this is fine and no one will care much."

### **Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP)**

This accumulation of pressure on women leads to the phenomenon described as Violence Against Women in Politics. This is a very critical issue that affects women's presence in the formal political sphere. It describes the amount of bullying and shaming that women in politics are exposed to, to the level that they become a form of violence that affects these women. Women are very exposed to political violence due to the existing social stereotypes that confine their presence within the circle of the family. If they lose after running for elections, the amount of harassment they receive, especially on social media, is many of the times related to their families and their responsibility to

prioritize them (Y. Nassar, personal communication, February 2, 2021). If they win, the first question in any interview they hold will be related to how they will balance between their work and family (Y. Nassar, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

In addition, women's personal lives are much more examined and criticized than men. Women candidates, and those who actually win, are put under the spotlight and assessed based on what they wear, how they speak, their previous or current affairs (Y. Nassar, personal communication, February 2, 2021). And if she makes a mistake, she is shamed and people will say this is what happens when we elect women (Y. Nassar, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

This is not in any way against the principle of holding politicians or public figures accountable. It is highlighting the absence of ethical and objective standards according to which people criticize or assess these personnel. Despite everything that men politicians have done wrong, despite whether they are actually knowledgeable in politics or any national topic, despite the mistakes they make, the public does not shame them based on gender. They might not even shame them at all. Most of the time it is political affiliations and interests that are contested. Not the individual himself. But in the case of women, their mistakes are directly tied to their gender. As implied by the interviewees, criticism in this case comes in the form of stereotypically constructed comments that exert much pressure on women.

As such, women are not only subject to domestic violence. As one participant in the focus groups explains, "This structural violence inflicted on women in politics touches on her morals and ethics and relies on rumors and scandals that are meant to harm her integrity using methods of bullying, e-bullying and blackmailing."

Regarding this issue, N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) stresses on the need to follow up with candidates before, during and after elections and hold psychological session with them to prepare them for what they will go through. As she explains, the bullying that women face might backlash on them and they might not run for elections ever again because the bullying will touch on their past, present, family, husband, kids, if she drinks alcohol, or her photos. Some women are forced to withdraw their candidacy for their men relatives. A lot of pressure faces women that many of them withdraw at early stages and never run for elections again. “After the elections, I was surprised with the number of votes I received and I filed complains about the results. I seemed fine and strong but in parallel I needed support, sessions, experts to talk with. It took me three months to think it through. We needed to learn from the experiences of each other because each one was alone,” she explains. Many women are being harmed because they are pushed to run for elections without any preparations before, during, and after. Election is a process and they should be trained on how to be involved in it, she adds.

### **Religious Laws and their Social and Economic Effects**

Although the reasons behind the low representation of women in the parliament are presented under sub-headlines throughout this chapter, this does not mean that they are independent of each other. In fact, the links that exist among them are much evident and it is this interconnectedness that makes this topic complex and rich in areas that should be studied. This section will tackle the effect of religious systems on the role of Lebanese women within society and their role and presence in politics. In fact, this

section represents the connections between the social, economic, and legal aspects that are a result of the religious factor.

As D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) explains, “The position of the woman in the family is a secondary one. This is due to the fact that all the regulations related to family issues are based on sectarian Personal Status Laws that do not grant her rights in issues of divorce, inheritance, etc. Accordingly, she’s in a weaker position, despite her sect. As such, although I can, as a woman, run for elections, my husband will have power to obstruct me based on the Rule of Obedience for example. When I’m in such a weak social position, I won’t be able to have a strong political career. So even if a woman is strong and chooses to run for elections, her husband and religious figures control her private life.” This reflects the relation between the social status of women and the effect of the absence of a civil law that rules in domestic issues.

Another effect of the ruling of religious laws on the condition of Lebanese women in society is related to an economic aspect. Due to the fact that some Personal Status Laws do not address gender equality in matters of inheritance, this leads to inequality in access to economic resources between men and women. As one participant in the focus groups explains, “In the case of Muslim sects, women inherit less than men according to the law. Unless parents dictate otherwise before death. In the case of Christian sects, although they inherit equally, women are subject to intimidation to give up their share to their brothers. It’s even expected from them to do so.” This reflects the relation between the economic status of women and the effect of the absence of a civil law that rules in these matters. The genders are not equal in front of the ruling law which is a religious one. As a result they are socially unequal. This social inequality reflects on

what is expected from women so that even when the law treats them as equals to men, they should renounce their rights.

An additional effect of the sectarian system and laws that rule in this country is expressed by another participant in the focus groups. As she explains, “Religious institutions are lucrative. That’s why they challenge the establishment of a civil law country. That’s why they challenge civil marriage for example. Things won’t get better as long as there exists this confessional system in which people are dependent on their sectarian groups.” The group further discussed the issue of civil marriage in Lebanon and how certain ministers tried to pass the case of the civil marriage of the couple Nidal and Khoulood then religious authorities strictly forbade it. “It’s so complicated to change this system but we have to work for it to change,” said one activist. In fact, N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) clearly stated that there is a need to hold a study that delves into the possible change that might affect women’s political participation if a change of the religious Personal Status Laws takes place.

### **Economic Independence**

All participants agreed on the importance of economic independence for the facilitation of women empowerment especially on the political level. When a woman is capable of being financially independent and is her own source of income, she becomes independent from any male figure that is in the position of her breadwinner. Whether her husband, son, brother or father. Economic independence for women, in general, is important for them to be able to have a say or take personal decisions without being subject to any threat to their financial needs. This importance increases for women who seek political career and who wish to run for elections. This is due to two reasons. First,

if they are economically independent, they can take the decision in the first place to run as candidates. Second, as previously explained, the electoral process for candidates requires a lot of money. Interviewees discussed these issues, from different points of views. Together, they present a comprehensive image on the economic aspect of the presence of women in the parliament.

The first point that D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) tackles is related to the marriage of minors. According to her, “That’s why we should be against minors’ marriage. In addition the biological reasons, these women are deprived from receiving education. As such, they are denied to enter the business market. As a result, they cannot be economically independent. This situation means they can’t divorce, can’t choose to have a career both political or not. In brief, no economic independence means no personal decisions.” This means that regulating laws related to the matter of marriage of minors exceeds the biological reasons. It addresses the issue of destroying the whole future of a woman beginning with denying her education and losing her capabilities and contribution to society as a productive person. If she doesn’t have the chance to learn and work, this will directly decrease her chances of developing a political career.

Another point discussed in both groups addresses the Double Burden issue. As the participants explained, we live in a country in which families need more than one income because of the hard economic situation. In the case of women, you need to work and take care of the family, which means less time for politics. Then comes the double and triple burden that affects women alone. She is required to work to help her husband. But she remains solely responsible for the household’s chores which makes it very

challenging to be a mom, wife, employee or employer, as well as an activist. Now add to this a political career. This issue of not dividing the domestic work and constantly blaming women for any dereliction creates a huge obstacle for them to progress especially through a political path. In other words, a woman is expected to first fulfill her family's obligations then to think of her work or ambitions. This is due to the unacceptance that men too should take responsibility for familial duties at home. This allows men to focus on their careers.

Another result to this perception is that women are forced to choose careers that suitably fit their schedules as moms and wives, teaching for example, and discard careers that consume more time outside the house. If she wants to become a member of parliament, what about the late night meetings that take place before and after elections? Yet the issue of night shifts and meetings is not specific to elections. Priorities in this case are discriminatory. The economic role of women in this case is complimentary. They work to assist their husbands with the income. But not to fulfill their career aspirations. A woman's work is not appreciated or looked at as an opportunity for her to advance. That's why when a couple has kids, she's the one who is expected to leave her job. That's why she is either unemployed or has a part-time job. That's why women constitute a bigger percentage of the informal jobs market. This informality affects their ability to become financially independent. Again, this affects their decisions and, in the context of this study, their ability to pursue a political career. As D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) explains, "We need to divide household work among the family so that each can continue with their future plans and careers."

This is the story of women who have financial limitations. What about women who have the money? As one activist explains, “Women are not economically free even if they have the money. Those who use their money to run for elections are criticized for wasting it at the expense of their families and homes. Their family is more entitled for this money. Even when women participated in the latest uprisings, they were accused that they are careless for leaving their homes.” So it is clear that women’s time, money, energy, and all their activities should be family-centered. Otherwise she’s not a good wife or mother. Another activist says, “Women are less likely to invest in politics. If a man and a woman both work, the man has more courage to pay for a political career. The woman would think that she’s depriving her kids from this money. They are more deserving of it. Men invest much more money and do not think in this way.”

As N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) summarizes it, “If a woman is able to be economically independent, she is free to choose to political work. She can decide on divorce. She can raise her children. It’s the same as when a couple fight. If she doesn’t work she wouldn’t leave. If she works, she’ll have options and she’s considered to be one of the supporters. Also, economic independence allows her to develop because economically independent women are leaving home, learning new experiences, are staying up-to-date, and advancing. Unlike those staying at home. For example, the wife of late politician Elias Skaff, knew about political work because of her husband. When he died, she carried on his work until his son can take charge. Because she’s economically doing well and has support, she can easily advance with the help of advisors. But women with no economic support or high income can’t advance

and reach. Political money is a necessity. If she wants to hold an interview on TV, she needs to pay. All activities need money.”

This brings us back to the role of political parties in financially supporting their candidates. As H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021) explains, “There aren’t political parties that fund women. One of the main reasons I didn’t run for relations is an economic one.”

### **Legal Issues: Quota and the Electoral System**

Some participants consider that there wouldn’t have been legal obstacles in the face of Lebanese women to run for parliamentary elections if the law was effectively implemented. Especially that the government ratified article 7 of CEDAW which addresses women’s political participation. But in practice, women and men are not treated equally and that’s because of social norms and economic consequences.

D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) addressed the wider sectarian structure that rules the country. She considers that another reason for the low presence of women in the parliament is the sectarian division of seats. Instead of ensuring a gender balanced parliament, the concern is that there’s a balance in the distribution of positions among the sects. Society as a whole is not based on a balance between the genders but on a balance among the sects. That’s why, in her opinion, women quota fails because of the sectarian distribution of positions. The gender quota will have to be incorporated within the sectarian quota and that’s why it failed.

However, several participants addressed the issue of quota as essential to pave the way for a transitory phase whereby women are encouraged to enter the formal

political sphere and the public gets used to seeing women working in politics. Once this is achieved, there will no longer be a need for this quota.

Regarding this topic one participant explains, “Some people say why implement a quota that will limit the presence of women with thirty percent of the parliament for example while she can win more seats than that. For those I say, men and women are not at the same starting point in this race. Men are already at the front so they will reach first. Quota is essential to unify the starting point between them.”

Another interviewee adds, “There is no mechanism that guarantees equality. I support quota because of the existing number of barriers that prevent society from accepting women in politics. So I need a transitional process to allow women to join political work. I can’t rely on a society that imposes different standards on men and women. Once equality is achieved no need for quota.”

In the opinion of yet another activist, “Although quota implies discrimination, we support it because it represents positive discrimination. It should be a temporary measure. Why don’t politicians apply quota? Because they aren’t concerned with women’s issues and there isn’t a commitment to support the presence of women on the table. Not implementing quota means not supporting women’s rights.”

To N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021), “The implementation of a quota for women is very difficult because it’s related to both the existing mentality and structure. Although personally I don’t like the idea of quota, because as a matter of fact competent candidates need a quota, I’m getting convinced with the need to implement it in order to train people to see women in the parliament. As

it happened in Europe, for example. Maybe after ten years, electing women becomes normal and women will be able to reach the parliament without quota.” She also gave another example related to women in the media who talk politics. She gave the examples of May Khreish, May Chidiac, Paula Yacoubian, or Bushra Al Khalil. In the opinion of N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021), despite if you agree with what these women say or not, when they appear on TVs and stimulate political discussions, they are training the public to see women in this domain. These women, if they run for elections, the public will identify them. Unlike those who don’t appear. So this brings us back to the role of political parties in bringing women to the light.

However, N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) expressed reservations related to the implementation of quota. As she explains, “We wouldn’t want political parties to fill women’s quota with women who are in line with their thoughts. So what is the difference if Nabih Berri or Randa Berri are in the parliament? Or what difference would Claudine Aoun or Sitrida Geagea do? They will reinforce the principle of allocations and I won’t benefit as a woman. How would they work on allowing Lebanese women to give their nationality if this contradicts with their political parties? The Personal Status Law will not even change.” In brief, she emphasized the need to elect women who work for women and who pave the way for other women to implement the desired change.

Another issue that is addressed by Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) based on her experience at the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), is the electoral system as a whole. It is not in favor of women for

several reasons and it affects women's participation before, during, and after the electoral process. She begins with the financial aspect of this topic. Since as previously mentioned women are less economically empowered than men, the fee for candidacy and the election's campaign are the first two obstacles. Electoral spending in Lebanon is not regulated and it stands in favor of the rich. As such, it does not guarantee equality neither between the rich and less fortunate, nor between men and women. Add to this the absence of regulation for the media. According to law, all candidates must receive the same amount of air time. This should also be for free. However, in Lebanon, these spots are sold and TV programs proliferate during times of elections because of the amount of money they receive. This is against the law. But no one monitors or regulates this issue. Again, this is not in favor of women because those who own the money are men politicians. Responsible entities, such as the Publications Court, did not look into this breaches although they are required to do so within 24 hours.

This issue is related also to the role of political parties in nominating and supporting women candidates. As Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) exclaims, "The political campaign requires a lot of spending on offices, delegates, lawyers, and several logistical matters. How can women afford all this without the support of political parties? Everything needed for a successful political campaign is not available for women. In fact, parties design their electoral lists based on people that have money and that are able to finance their campaign with them. Also, they do surveys within electoral districts to choose winning candidates. Which automatically means there aren't any women. During the last elections, lists weren't based on political

affiliations but on money and common interests. This is not a fair competition for women.”

Another key point addressed by Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) is that voters' choices are mostly political and not gender-related. This means that if a political party runs a woman who is strongly affiliated by it for elections, voters will vote for her because she belongs to their political group. That's why, in her opinion, Dima Jamali was able to win and Inaya Ezzedine was able to secure a high count of votes. So if a woman is supported by a political party she has high chances of winning. Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) cited a study that was done by LADE on municipal elections. The study shows that electors don't mind electing women who belong to their political group. “I don't know if this is true, but it seems that political choice overcomes gender choice,” she says.

The last issue regarding the electoral system is discussed by H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021) who considered that the preferential vote during the last elections of 2018 is sexist and gives the priority to men. Because men hold the key positions within their political parties and people will choose candidates in these positions. Another participant in the focus groups also discussed the need to amend the structure of electoral lists. She considered that quota alone is not enough because it should be accompanied by mechanisms that regulate the distribution of names. She gives an example on whether lists should follow the order of woman, man, woman... or man, woman, man.... In brief, she suggests that a legal framework is needed that regulates all details of the elections to enhance women's representation.

## **Role of Feminist Organizations**

N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) explains that women who are involved in political work are present within three circles: as activists and protesters in the streets, as candidates during elections, and as members of feminist organizations and NGOs. Among these three categories there exists a gap and lack of cooperation and communication on women's issues. Some networks are selective and elitist. At many times, feminist cadres from the street are not invited to trainings depending on the sources of funding or organizing entities. In addition to this vertical gap, there exists a horizontal gap among feminist organizations and NGOs that might get carried out by competition for example. This leads to the division of efforts instead of joining efforts. If they coordinate on working together, they will be able to do more. If they stay divided, they are repeating the same work. "That's why sometimes we attend several trainings all addressing the same issue or that's why two sources end up funding two similar projects," she says.

N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) discusses her experience at the trainings organized by the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW). "I don't see much of activists from the street. Attendees are selectively invited. I asked the commission to aggregate new lists of women activists, especially from rural areas. This list should not only include the names of the mayors' wives," she remarks. Another point is that programs and trainings are rarely continued. "There's a fund, there's a training. The fund ends, it ends as well. There isn't a higher national concern regarding an agenda on gender equality." In addition, the funding is affected by the political affiliation of the organizations. When there was a Ministry for Women

Affairs, there was a competition with the NCLW because the first was affiliated with the Prime Minister while the latter with the President. In this case, women's organizations are funded based on which political side the donor chooses to support. Put aside that the powers of such organizations are limited and shallow (N. Baderaldeen, personal communication, February 16, 2021).

“Is it possible that during the elections, the NCLW did not nominate or support not one candidate!” she exclaims. In her opinion, the NCLW is not playing its actual role in advancing women's rights and gender equality. This is because the political affiliation of its President Mrs. Claudine Aoun Roukoz, the daughter of the current President of Lebanon General Michel Aoun, are against these advancements. “That's why in Lebanon the efforts to enhance the presence of women in politics should come as a package. Because the existing religious and patriarchal systems resist change,” explains N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter asked Lebanese women activists the question on what are the factors behind the low representation of women in the parliament in Lebanon. It represents the second step of this study which will allow for a final comparison between what the literature already tackles regarding this topic and what factors need further research and studying.

The interviewees delved into a lot of details and issues that concern them as activists who aspire to reach an inclusive political system that is free from gender inequalities and discrimination. They covered factors that affect women's participation

in the parliament on several levels and expressed the need to conduct further studies that deeply examine these issues as well as empirically tests the relation between each factor and the representation of women in the parliament.

The next chapter will discuss with the same interviewees possible steps that should be taken to encourage women to run for parliamentary elections and facilitate their participation within the formal political sector.

# **Chapter Five**

## **Reforms Needed to Facilitate the Participation of Lebanese Women in the Parliament**

After presenting the obstacles that hinder women from reaching the parliament in Lebanon in the previous chapter, this chapter provides a list of solutions to these issues, based on the opinions and personal experiences of the interviewed activists. The answers and discussions presented in this chapter cover three main questions that were addressed to the participants: Why are women present in the streets but absent from the parliament? Would you consider running for parliamentary elections? Why or why not? How can encourage women to run for parliamentary elections?

### **Participation of Women in the Street vs. in the Parliament**

In the opinion of H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021), the revolution is a witness on the important role of women. “Even the media did not give us attention until we were in the revolution because we were at the heart of these events and they were covering them,” she explains. To her, women stood up for their presence.

Why was this possible? Interviewees had several ideas regarding this point. According to Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021), women were able to participate because the revolution is not structured as political parties are. It was a breather for women without pressure. “The problem is not in the will of the woman, she

wants to be active and the revolution confirmed this,” she says. In addition, it’s more practical to protest because women can choose the time that suits them, escort their children or families. The protests were an open platform.

Participants in the focus groups had additional thoughts as well. As one interviewee explains, running for elections requires a different level of commitment and financial requirements. At the uprisings, you can choose to protest one day and skip another. In addition, at the protests there is a sense of solidarity. People are with their circles of friends, family, other women and support groups. In elections, women take a lonely road specifically when political parties do not support them. Another point is the nature of engagement. At protests, it’s more random.

A key issue addressed by this interviewee is the difference between the roles of women in the street vs. in the parliament. As she explains, “Many women played stereotypical roles during the protests such as standing as buffer zones and symbolizing peace, cooking, distributing roses. Many women did not leave their comfort zones and reproduced some stereotypes. I’m not saying that this is wrong but that’s what allowed for an increase in the presence and role of women during the protests. The parliament, on the other hand, is more challenging to the stereotypical roles. It is male dominated. The street is not.” In her opinion, just as women were left outside the formal political arena after the war, the same will happen after the uprisings. Women will be put aside. A final point that she addresses is that in the street there’s a wide spectrum of issues and demands along which people can move and change sides. This informality facilitates participation as well.

So would these activists run for parliamentary elections or do they prefer to work within the informal political sphere? The answers varied among participants. Some say that yes they think of running for elections, others have already done it, and some have little interest in doing so.

Some participants in the focus groups explained that they choose not to run for elections because politics is against their values. They consider that politics is corrupt and stands against their ethical principles and might require that they give up some of them at a certain point. One participant says, "I support those who want to, but I'm not interested in being within the public sphere." Another participant says, "I'm an activist for the sake of my children because I believe in my country and have a national goal. It's not impossible for me to run for elections but I currently work within the framework of the revolution. Politics is a game of interests and I don't want this. I want a system based on principles."

Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) thinks of running for parliamentary elections when the system resembles her principles. "I need to be part of political group that has a clear social and economic agenda, that is secular, that has internal democratic dynamics in decision making, that is independent and follows a clear way of choosing its candidates," she explains. When asked if she would run as a candidate for the sake of increasing the number of women candidates, she answered, "If there's a group that resembles me, I would run even if I don't guarantee winning. Change doesn't happen through one person, so if I win I need to be part of a group to make a change."

One of the participants in the focus groups narrates her personal experience with this issue. As she explains, “When I witness what women are subject to in politics, I count to ten before taking such a decision. People dig their histories and affairs and bombard them. I don’t want to open my Facebook and get harassed. This structural violence is very intimidating and is a major obstacle. How much will I be able to handle if I ran for elections? In what position will I be putting my husband and children if I was bullied or if they were bullied? Another factor is the money. How much am I ready to deprive my children money that I will spend on an electoral campaign? These obstacles can be mitigated if I’m part of a political party. It is very important to have strong political structures that back, protect and offer buffer zones to independent candidates, both financially and emotionally.”

Another participant explains that although political work is of high interest to her, she hasn’t thought about the idea of running for elections. This is because she’s in a phase where she’s focusing on her career. “Maybe I haven’t thought about this until you asked because I’m a youth so I have low chances to succeed. Besides being a woman, youth as well face extra obstacles. An example of this is the conflict on the minimum age of voters and tying it to demographic issues. The youth look at things from different perspectives and solutions. When I was younger, I was more enthusiastic. At the age of eighteen, one cannot run or elect. At the age of 25, one wouldn’t win unless they inherit their position. Unconsciously, the idea of running for elections becomes at the bottom of my mind.”

H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021) considers running for parliamentary elections on two conditions. If she was able to secure clean financial

support and on the basis of a clear program. She considers that her problem is actually financial because based on her research, this process requires a lot of money. A minimum of \$100,000. Otherwise, she prefers to stay in opposition from outside the parliament rather than joining one of the current political parties. “That’s why we are working on launching a new political party through which I might run for elections,” she explains.

N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) who was previously a candidate both at the 2013 and 2018 elections talks about her personal experience and says that she would want to repeat it. The first issue that she addresses is again related to the money needed to organize a successful campaign. “It’s not only about the will but the availability of money as well,” she explains. Candidates need access to media which is also paid. “When I announced my candidacy I did it from the street among a group of activists. I had an opportunity for few interviews because the media recognized me due to my work and because I benefitted from a fund that assisted candidates. But some of my friends had nothing of this. My family and friends supported me,” she added. “I addressed the issues of civil marriage, personal status laws, women giving nationality, and violence against women. Despite that my surrounding environment doesn’t accept everything, I wanted to be real. Also, it was hard for me to win a seat against the Shiite duo. So I worked on supporting the list I was on as a whole.”

N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) also explained that running for elections consumes a lot of time. It means only working for elections. It requires a huge amount of financial and logistical capabilities that women aren’t able to

secure. “Plus the electoral law does not guarantee equality of spending among the candidates,” she adds.

## **Required Reforms**

As D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) explains, women are educated, cultured, and active in civil society. That’s why we saw them participating in the protests. People discovered several women political activists. In her opinion, the revolution reflected that politics in Lebanon does not take women’s presence into consideration. That’s why the government that followed the uprisings included some women. Maybe because they were embarrassed not to include some.

This supports the claim that necessitates the need to study the situation of Lebanese women within the formal political sector. The fact that women are knowledgeable and capable of taking political ventures, poses a huge question regarding their absence from the parliament.

## **Legal Reforms**

Some participants in the focus groups stressed on the need for a quota system. According to them securing seats for women who have the will to induce change is a necessary first step. Another step is the need to empower women on the personal level, in matters of family, work, and personal status laws, so she can be stronger both the personal and public level. This represents a progressive kind of support that will help her have presence and participation at the national level.

Another group of participants highlighted the need for gender sensitive policies especially those that affect the economic status of women. One participant explains that

the value of wages for women should be more considerate of their health expenses that are biologically innate, such as pads and pain killers for example. So it's barely just for them to have an equal payment with men, put aside a lower one. Another participant addressed the issue of parental leaves. It's unfair that women are allowed to take up to 10 weeks maternity leave and men only three days. "This is an extension to the patriarchal mentality. It leads to less hiring of women because they'll have to leave more. A woman will have to choose between her career and family. A man will have three, four, or five children and his career won't be affected." In her opinion, reproduction is a social role. When there's such a difference between maternity and paternity leaves, it means we're looking at reproduction as a biological role. When the two leaves are equal, we're looking at reproduction as a social role. This new mindset is needed to secure the potential of men and women to be full citizens who can achieve political participation in a natural unforced way.

Another required reform is a unitary law under which both genders are treated equally. If matters of custody and divorce, for example, remain in favor of men, women are automatically in a weaker position. The current Personal Status Law reinforces the dominance of men over women. "It's a tool in the hand of the patriarchal system to threaten women with," a participant explains.

As N. Baderaldeen (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021) clarifies, "Both quota and the changing of the Personal Status Law won't lead to a magical change. Political parties hold the responsibility for enhancing the presence of women in politics by training them, supporting them and presenting them to the public. Also, women have a responsibility to be solid in their decisions, rise up within their parties

and break the stereotypes.” In fact, as Y. Nassar (Personal Communication, February 2, 2021) additionally explains, the main problem is with the structure of political parties and their internal dynamics, not with the capacity of women. In her opinion, women do not need additional trainings on capacity building because this implies that the problem is in them while the actual problem is with political parties and their reluctance to lobby for women and support them. The evidence is that once women had an open platform to participate in politics, they were on the frontlines.

### **Campaigns and Trainings**

At the level of society, workshops and media campaigns should address the issue of gender roles and the adequate ways of raising our children on this issue (Y. Nassar, personal communication, February 2, 2021). In this way, new generations will grow with a better understanding of these constructions that affect their choices of their careers or their behavior in general. This will progressively affect women’s choices of political paths and at the same time mitigate men’s discontentment towards this issue.

For D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020), women have the will to run for elections so efforts should be done to facilitate their participation. “Electoral laws should be amended to benefit both men and women who are independent and progressive,” she adds. In addition, there’s an important role for the media to play. First regarding equality of air time between men and women candidates and second to let people know about these women.

A main issue is related to the redirecting of funds that are allocated to women’s issues. “This is a trending topic but unfortunately the efforts are not leading to substantial changes because of the repetition of the same projects and trainings. Funds

should be more directed towards the actual economic empowerment of women and towards studies that assess the actual needs of women for them to be politically empowered. Personal experiences of previous candidates should be studied to extract scientific indicators on this matter. Funds should support women in syndicates or those who want to run for elections. Civil society cannot do this alone and there isn't substantial formal efforts in this regard," (N. Baderaldeen, personal communication, February 16, 2021).

"Another point related to funds that support women candidates during elections is that they oblige them with agendas and topics that makes it harder for them to compete. For example, one fund required beneficiaries to address issues of abortion and homosexuality. If a woman speaks about these issues in her village, Nabatiyeh for example, she automatically has no more chances to win," (N. Baderaldeen, personal communication, February 16, 2021).

H. El Kaakour (Personal Communication, February 19, 2021) addressed the issue of workshops and trainings. She considers that enough of these have been done. Women are trained enough to speak, write and communicate. It's society that needs training. "The problem is not in women but in the society, government, laws, and political parties. I'm empowered, don't empower me. Empower men to be able to understand the importance of women in politics. Train me on fund raising. What is the benefit of training a woman on how to speak with the media if no one hosts her? All the trainings are concentrated on her. Train the media," she explains.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter represents a recommendation section that compiles a list of proposals from the participating activists regarding the changes that should be done to facilitate the participation of women in formal politics and encourage them to run for parliamentary elections.

It shed light on possible reforms and changes that, in the opinion of Lebanese women activists, should be addressed in order to encourage women to participate in the formal political sector. Of course these are not exclusively enough, but they pave the way for future studies and researches on this matter. This chapter together with the previous one provide a solid foundation for researchers that study women's political participation especially in the parliament. The lack of data in Lebanon is common among many topics and women's issues is one of them. This study does not provide empirical data but does surely provide an outline that includes the concerns of women activists and their opinions regarding the low representation of women in their country's parliament. Chapter 4 provided the reasons behind this and Chapter 5 suggested some solutions.

# Chapter Six

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to link the academic literature that addresses the low presence of Lebanese women in parliament to the thoughts and opinions of Lebanese women activists. The thesis asked Lebanese women activists about their opinions regarding the obstacles that are leading to the low presence of women in the parliament in Lebanon to fill the gap that is present in the literature. It turned out that although the literature covers main points regarding this topic, it misses on others. This does not mean that no one has ever talked about these additional points, but they haven't been reported, studied, and researched. They haven't been heard and written. This study wrote down women's concerns. Especially those that are based on their personal experiences and encounters within the field of political activism. Some of these women are also previous candidates for parliamentary elections. So the sample provided answers from different perspectives.

The two types of interviews that were held allowed for very interesting exchange of ideas. The focus groups questioned fundamental arguments that are present among women themselves regarding their role, position, and situation in society in general and in the political game in specific. The debates among these women shed light on very important topics related to the political role of women in Lebanon and addressed core issues related to their absence from the formal political sphere in this country. The individual interviews were more directed towards specific aspects of this issue based on

the field and experience of the interviewee. So while group interviews allowed for rich and multi-faceted discussions, the individual ones dug deeper into one certain aspect based on personal experiences.

This direct contact with women activists allowed for the revelation of key issues that should be discussed when asking the question on why are Lebanese women absent from the parliament. Although many of the arguments presented in the literature were supported by these women, they had more to add. They expressed personal experiences and concerns. They said things as they are. They pointed towards the problems. It should be noted that discussions exceeded the time set for the interviews. This shows how much Lebanese women activists have to say regarding their representation in formal politics.

Throughout the discussions, participants addressed social issues and economic ones. They addressed legal and religious constraints. They analyzed interrelations and gave real examples. They discussed each other's points of view. For example, while some consider that they need to question the political program of a woman candidate and vote accordingly, others ask why aren't men candidates asked much about the programs they have to offer. While some never consider running for parliamentary elections despite their active role in political issues, others do.

Another interesting discussion revolved around defining representation of women itself. Although, in the context of this thesis, this means the number of women present in the parliament, some activists considered representation to denote the representation of women's rights and concerns, despite if by a man or by a woman. So a male member of the parliament who believes in gender equality and in the advancement

of women through certain agendas and programs, represents women more than the presence of a female MP who simply works on progressing her political party's agenda that remains far from supporting any form of gender equality.

These lively debates produced lists of problems that are considered as hurdling women's political career in Lebanon and provided insightful recommendations on how to help facilitate women's political progress in Lebanon. For example, one of the most agreed upon issue that women activists considered as preventing Lebanese women from climbing up the ladder of political leadership and reaching the parliament is the role of political parties in this country. Specifically, the lack of opportunities given for women to build a strong political profile and thus their inability to present themselves as strong competitors during parliamentary elections. Another commonly agreed upon issue is the effect of the Personal Status Law on both the private and public life of Lebanese women.

### **Linking the Academic Literature and Activism**

The common points addressed between the literature and the opinions of the interviewed Lebanese women activists are related to the broad topics of the patriarchal and sectarian systems as well as social and cultural norms. The interviewees are clear that both men and women are held responsible for reinforcing this structure and environment that nurtures gender discrimination. As D. Moukalled (Personal Communication, December 17, 2020) summarizes it, this mentality is a product of the effect of religion and culture combined. The result is a division in gender roles and that excludes women from politics. On one hand, women are raised in a way that political

careers are not among their options. On the other hand, men are raised in a way to reject the presence of women in politics and question it.

Another common point is related to the political and electoral systems. The literature addressed this point in relation to the level of democratization of the political system and the presence of quota in the electoral system. The interviewees expressed that the obstacles within these systems that affect women's participation are present in every aspect of the electoral process beginning with the fee for candidacy, electoral spending, expenses of the campaign, inequality in media coverage, structure of lists, effect of preferential votes, division of seats along sectarian criteria, and even the choice of voters whether it is only political or affected by the gender of candidates.

Another specific point, which represents a major concern for the interviewees is the role of political parties. This point is addressed by Rowayheb (2014) who discusses the role of political leaders in relation to the presence of women in the formal political sphere. As explained by the participants, the role of political parties is crucial to the advancement of women along the political process until reaching the parliament. They constitute the necessary framework within which members gain the training and experience to pursue political work. Also, they provide the financial support that is needed to cover the high costs of electoral spending during parliamentary elections. In fact, they highly stressed on this point.

Regarding the effect of religion and religious laws which constitute the Personal Status Codes in Lebanon, interviewees agreed that their effect is very substantial on the status of women within her family and society in general. The religious laws and institutions yield women as secondary degree citizens and deprive them from the ability

to decide on any personal matter related to them. This weakening of women's position vis-à-vis their male counterparts reinforces men's dominance over women's lives and exposes them to being controlled by the decision of their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, or any man who feels that he is entitled to protect and guard them. Even in front of the law, they are not equal citizens and the law is in favor of men. This affects women's abilities to take decisions and thus their freedom to pursue political careers.

As for the economic barriers, it's beyond equal wages. The marriage of minors is an economic obstacle. The Double Burden effect is an economic obstacle. The reluctance of political parties to support women is an obstacle. The pressure exerted on women to prioritize their responsibilities at home over their careers is also another one. These obstacles affect their progress and their ability to become economically independent. They jeopardize their ability to become financially capable especially that this point is crucial for women who wish to seek a political career and run for parliamentary elections.

Regarding the role of feminist organizations and women NGOs, it is agreed that there is a need to reorganize their work, increase their cooperation, and increase their inclusiveness. Although this, and the previous issues, might be known or spoken about, there aren't substantial studies and researches that address them. This can only be accomplished by implementing profound studies that address these factors, propose solutions to this lack of coordination and mismanagement within and among these organizations, as well as test the direct effect of their role on the presence of Lebanese women in the parliament.

The main headlines that the literature needs to start further addressing and that lack substantial research in Lebanon are: the extra pressure and criticism on women, the role of the media and violence against women in politics. Both women and men tend to add more pressure on women who choose political work. Because we are used to the presence of men in such roles and positions, we do not ask twice if they are capable or not. The fact that he is a man saves him from scrutiny and assessment. But when it comes to women, suddenly we are concerned with their qualifications and competency.

The accumulation of pressure on women leads to the phenomenon described as Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP). This is a very critical issue that affects women's presence in the formal political sphere. It describes the amount of bullying and shaming that women in politics are exposed to, to the level that they become a form of violence that affects these women. Women are very exposed to political violence due to the existing social stereotypes.

In addition, women's personal lives are much more examined and criticized than men. There aren't ethical and objective standards according to which political figures are criticized or assessed. In the case of women, their mistakes are directly tied to their gender. Criticism in this case comes in the form of stereotypically constructed comments that exert much pressure on women. The phenomenon of VAWP is grabbing more and more attention and needs serious studying Lebanon.

The role of the media in relation to women's presence in the formal political sphere covers the media's unfairness in allocating air time among candidates, especially between men and women, its dereliction in exposing political women figures to the public, and its reinforcement of the stereotypical roles of women as well as being part of

the pressure campaigns that target women activists, candidates, or politicians. This is not to generalize. Some media support women and give them better opportunities and exposure. However, the wider perception is that the media in Lebanon needs a lot of training in dealing with women candidates in a way that respects their capabilities and addresses their political work and electoral program, not their personal lives and stereotypical topics.

## **Final Note**

The presence of women in the parliament in Lebanon is a major topic that should be further studied. This country lacks data on several issues and this topic is one of them. This topic cannot be dismissed because there's a clear gap between the participation of Lebanese women in the informal political sphere vs. the formal one.

This study is not an end in itself. It presents a guideline for researchers who address the topic of women in politics in Lebanon and provides them with key areas that need further studying. The thesis showed that further studies should be done on the topic of women's participation in the formal political sphere in Lebanon because it is such a multi-layered and complex topic at which social, economic, political, religious, structural, and cultural factors intersect. This study showed that the literature does address common concerns with women activists but needs updating on others. Even those addressed by the literature need updating as well and more in depth studies.

What was further found by this thesis is that there's a lack of a thorough understanding of the direct relation between these factors and the presence of women in the parliament. Scientific and empirical studies are needed on how each of these factors

affects the representation of women in the parliament (N. Baderaldden, personal communication, February 16, 2021). This means that it is not enough to compile lists of factors that might be leading to the low presence of Lebanese women in the parliament but also carry empirical and scientific studies that capture the direct link between each factor and this outcome as well as test the impact of the suggested solutions in changing the status quo. Such studies need money, time and effort especially if conducted on a national scale.

Not all interviewed women have an interest in running for elections but all of them want to make sure that for those who do, there should be no obstacles on any level. Just as some interviewees highlighted the need for additional studies, this research represents an invitation to hold thorough studies on each of the mentioned factors and its direct relation with the participation and representation of Lebanese women in the formal political sphere.

Finally, as expressed by the participating activists, the matter of the representation of women in the parliament is not limited to the presence of women only. Their concern is that even elected men should support gender equality agendas. As one participant summarizes it, “I want representation for issues and inclusion for genders. I want to compete with both men and women who are with or against me. My loyalty is for my principles, not my gender. Political behavior is not related to gender. I vote for women issues. The problem is not in me, but in the system.” In this sense, gender equality in politics is a topic that should be worked on with everyone, men and women.

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