WOMEN AT THE TABLE: INSIGHTS FROM LEBANESE WOMEN IN POLITICS

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REPORT

Women at the Table: Insights from Lebanese Women in Politics

UN WOMEN

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1.UNDERSTANDING LEBANON

No analysis of women's political struggle in Lebanon can be complete without a brief understanding of the very complex socio-political landscape. One might argue that Lebanon had always been unstable, but post-civil war, the years since 2005 have been particularly turbulent and the country has been consistently plagued by crises — economic, political, and social. Multiple assassinations of public figures, the 2006 July War, violent clashes in 2008, external threats from ISIS, and an almost decade-long protracted Syrian refugee crisis has exacerbated the situation, culminating in what the World Bank termed in 2022 as a "deliberate depression"[1] .

The ever-worsening social, economic, and political landscape has fueled dissatisfaction amongst the population inside Lebanon. The garbage and waste crisis in 2015 set off demonstrations by civil society and eventually evolved to become a symbol of larger, deep-rooted frustrations[2], exploding again in October 2019 with popular protests. The 2020 Port of Beirut explosion exposed structural vulnerabilities and amplified deteriorating social indicators. Inadequate infrastructure was put under further pressure and continues to wreak havoc on daily life.

According to the 2021 Lebanon Economic Monitor, the financial crisis that emerged in 2019 is likely to "rank in the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century."[3] Gross Domestic Product fell by almost 40 per cent in 2020, the Lebanese Lira lost over 90 per cent of its value, and unemployment rates soared[4]. A severe economic contraction and depression is usually associated with conflict, and Lebanon has long been identified as a fragile state prone to conflict. As of 2021, Lebanon ranks 34th most fragile out of 179 countries and experienced one of the biggest increases in fragility ratings due to political polarization, lack of social cohesion, and economic decline.[5] The situation has been compounded by decades of corruption[6], nepotism, and sectarianism against the backdrop of a deeply patriarchal society. In its 2021 Democracy Index, the Economist downgraded Lebanon from a hybrid regime to an authoritarian regime.[7]

The multilayered crises have also dramatically increased poverty rates, and drastically reduced living conditions. In fact, it is estimated that 82 per cent of Lebanon's total population is deprived of adequate access to health, education, employment, housing, and electricity.[8] Moreover, these crises are taking place within the context of enormous structural gender inequalities meaning Lebanese women have been disproportionately affe-ted by these shocks. Indeed, the hardest hit were already marginalized in society.

1 World Bank. 2022. Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2021: The Great Denial. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/how-large-public-procurement . License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

2 Human Rights Watch. 2017. "'As If You're Inhaling Your Death': The Health Risks of Burning Waste in Lebanon." Accessed https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/12/01/if-youre-inhaling-your-death/health-risks-burning-waste-lebanon.

3 Lebanon Economic Monitor. 2021. Lebanon Sinking (To the Top 3). Washington D.C.: World Bank Group Middle East and North Africa Region.

4 Ibid.

5 Fragile States Index. 2022. "Measuring Fragility: Risk and Vulnerability in 179 Countries." Accessed 3 March 2022. https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

6 In 2019, 68 per cent of people believed corruption increased over the 12 months prior. According to the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index, Lebanon ranked 154 out of 180. Transparency International. 2021. "Lebanon Country Data." Accessed 3 March 2022. https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/lebanon

7 Economist Intelligence Unit. 2022. Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge. London: EIU.

8 Report on Multidimensional Poverty in Lebanon 2019-2021 by UN ESCWA. According to the report the concept of poverty has expanded beyond income and takes into account various aspects of living conditions. Available at: https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-warns-three-quarters-lebanon%E2%80%99s-residents-plunge-poverty.

1.1 Methodology

This report, the third in a series by UN Women Lebanon, explores the various barriers to political participation Lebanese women face, though from the vantage point of women who have reached pioneering and senior positions within Lebanon's political landscape. The report aims to offer policy makers and practitioners a better understanding of the challenges – and opportunities – that exist when seeking to be female in public and/or political office in Lebanon, while taking as a starting point that the full and meaningful inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making is a critical prerequisite for genuine democracy and gender equality. For these purposes, "women in politics" is defined as holding a position of political power or prominence.

Interviews with seven current and former female Lebanese politicians were conducted throughout 2020 and 2021 to offer a starting point to understand women's engagement in traditional political structures. The women selected for this report were firsts in many forms — first Member of Parliament, first woman to hold specific ministerial portfolios, first party head, first woman to have a baby while holding a cabinet position, first woman to represent her community in Parliament, and so on. As political pioneers these women paved the way for many others, many whose names we do not know — yet.

A few key themes emerge from these interviews. Challenges the women face include gender-based discrimination, unfavorable attitudes to women in politics, and prohibitive patriarchal structures — all of which will be examined here. The documentation and analysis of women's individual experiences within these systems provided is invaluable to the discussion of women's political participation in Lebanon. The report infuses strategies and recommendations suggested by the women interviewed to increase the presence — and power — of women in Lebanese politics.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN LEBANON

Although Lebanon has made progress in reducing gender inequality in sectors such as health and education, significant gaps still exist.[9] In order to understand this complicated landscape in which Lebanese women in politics must operate, it is necessary to provide an outline of Lebanon and its political context.

Prior to the Lebanese Civil War (1975 to 1990), women in Lebanon were gaining more legal recognition and stature. The Lebanese Constitution granted women equal rights to men with no discrimination and Lebanon had become amongst the first Arab countries to grant women the right to vote and stand for election in 1952.[10] Ten years later, Myrna Boustani made history when she became the first woman elected – running uncontested – to Lebanon's Parliament, taking the seat of her deceased father in 1963. Legal recognition in 1970 of the League of Lebanese Women's Rights, an organization advocating for women's political participation, and the lifting of restrictive guardian travel laws in 1974, all signaled progressive change for the plight of women.

The Civil War had detrimental effects, reversing gains made. During the war, while some women joined militias or lead work to end the war, most found themselves largely confined to the domestic realm, managing the fallout from war – ensuring continued access to food, health care, education and caring for children, the sick, and elderly. Women in Lebanon again found themselves marginalized after the end of the war, from the Taef Agreement and post-war reconstruction process.[11] However, this did not mean they were relegated to the sidelines. Many took on volunteering positions in relief organizations while others organized collective nonviolent movements, including hunger strikes and marches.

In the years following, Lebanon — still wounded by the 15-year Civil War — was marked by precarious democracy, corruption, and sectarianism. Deteriorating conditions and national dissatisfaction throughout the post-war period led to an increase in civil society activity, most notably by women's movements. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) gave momentum to women's rights and promoted greater engagement with international standards. As such, in 1996 the National Commission for Lebanese Women was created to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and, in 1997, Lebanon signed and ratified the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). At the same time, while these efforts were being made to develop women's rights in the country, Lebanon made reservations and objections to several articles of the treaty concerning equal rights, marriage, and family relations.

Gender discrimination remains rife in Lebanon's legal framework, and progress on draft laws and

9 World Bank and UN Women. 2021. The Status of Women in Lebanon: Assessing Women's Access to Economic Opportunities, Human Capital Accumulation & Agency. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

10 In 1952, the Women's Political Rights Agreement was signed, and it gave Lebanese women who had at least finished elementary education the right to vote. The limitation requiring women to at least have an elementary education to vote was lifted five years later in 1957.

11 The Taef Agreement, officially known as the National Reconciliation Accord, was reached to provide "the basis for the ending of the civil war and the return to political normalcy in Lebanon". Negotiated in Taef, Saudi Arabia, it was designed to end the decades-long Lebanese civil war.

implementing amendments to laws has been slow. It was not until 2008 that an anti-domestic violence law was drafted and passed 6 years later, in 2014.[12] Additionally, article 562 of the criminal code, which considered honor killings as a mitigating factor to a crime, was only repealed in 2011.[13]

Lebanon still has much work to do to guarantee basic rights for women — especially in relation to divorce, inheritance, and child custody. Lebanon does not have a unified civil code regulating personal status matters. Instead, 15 personal status laws exist under the various religious authorities, all of which discriminate against women. Basic rights are not guaranteed under these laws, and are in fact subjected to the jurisprudence of the different religious sects. As a result, discrimination of women is embedded into law. Furthermore, the nationality law (1925) has not been amended, meaning Lebanese women cannot pass citizenship on to their children, while Lebanese men with foreign spouses can bestow Lebanese citizenship upon their children.

Lebanon still has no minimum age of marriage and no legislation prohibiting child marriage. Rather, each religious sect sets their own rules to determine the minimum age of marriage. The absence of legislation regarding marriage extends beyond legal age limits. Marriage in Lebanon is performed by religious institutions, often obligating one partner to convert to the faith of the other. As a result, many interfaith couples opt for a civil marriage outside of Lebanon. This has led to calls for Lebanon to adopt civil marriage that is secular and recognized by the state rather than a cleric. Despite myriad attempts by women politicians, activists, and civil society organizations to bring this issue up for deliberation, none have been successful — yet.

Women are even more vulnerable to inequity with Lebanon ranking a low 132nd out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Index.[14] Moreover, Lebanon ranks 132 out of 170 in the 2021 Women, Peace and Security index meaning women are at an even greater risk due to conditions of insecurity.[15] Even though the female literacy rate is 95 per cent, other indicators are not as promising.[16] The labor force participation rate is 22 per cent for women compared to 66 per cent for men.[17] Sexual harassment became a crime in 2020, an important development.[18] Human Rights Watch, however, have argued that the law misses key protections that must be addressed moving forward.[19] There continues to be significant gaps in the data pertaining to key gendered areas such as violence against women and unpaid labor. Furthermore, regular monitoring of gender data is difficult due to the absence of comparable methodologies which ultimately makes it harder to close the gender gap.

Political, economic, legal, and social barriers present in patriarchal societies disproportionately discriminate against women. Such structural barriers deter women from entering public roles, especially in the political sphere. This is particularly true of the Lebanese political environment where women still have not cracked the "political glass ceiling."[20] 2004 saw two women appointed as ministers — the first Lebanese government with female representatives.[21] While the 2022 Parliamentary election had the country's highest ever number of registered women candidates, women only hold 6.4 per cent of parliamentary seats at present. Furthermore, there is currently only 1 woman in Lebanon's caretaker government.

12 The law, however, was incomplete and did not include marital rape as a crime, nor did it sufficiently protect women from other abuses. Moreover, despite amendments to the law in 2020 to increase protections, significant gaps remain.

13 Human Rights Watch. 2011. "Lebanon: Law Reform Targets 'Honor' Crimes." HRW. 11 August. Accessed 5 April 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/11/lebanon-law-reform-targets-honor-crimes

14 World Economic Forum. 2021. Benchmarking Gender Gaps: Findings from the Global Gender Gap Index 2021. Geneva: WEF.

15 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2021. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO.

16 UN Women. 2020. "Country Fact Sheet: Lebanon." Accessed February 16 2022. https://data.unwomen.org/country/lebanon.

17 The Lebanon Follow-up Labour Force Survey January 2022. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_844837.pdf

18 Jabbour, R. and Elzir, A. 2022. "Sexual harassment in the workplace in Lebanon - where are we headed?" Accessed 23 February 2022. World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/sexual-harassment-workplace-lebanon-where-are-we-headed.

19 Lebanon: Sexual Harassment Law Missing Key Protections. March 5, 2021. https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/lebanon-sexual-harassment-law-missing-key-protections

20 Nassif, G. 2020. Women's political participation in Lebanon and the limits of aid-driven empowerment. Beirut: Lebanon Support.

21 Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation. 2017. Women's Political Participation in Lebanon: Perspectives from Mount-Lebanon. Barcelona: EMWF.

This, however, does not negate the myriad forms of political activism currently underway in the country. Civil society activism has a long tradition in Lebanon, not least among Lebanese women who have been demanding change for decades. Lebanon has one of the most active feminist movements in the Arab region. In Lebanon, women — particularly young women — are demonstrating their politics in non-traditional, non-structured forms. Women are more active in local-level politics and university political activism is particularly galvanizing for young women. Lebanese women are on the frontlines of protests and inspire the formation of new political groups built from their organic civil activism.

The October 2019 uprising saw unprecedented numbers of women participating to protest discriminatory laws, the patriarchal system, and corruption. Lebanese women found space to voice their dissatisfaction through new political groupings and civil society movements, united in their demands for anti-domestic violence laws and changes to personal status laws. This was significant because women from all sects of society joined together in a rare show of collaborative action. It is important to build on such momentum and convert activism into action on the political stage to effect genuine change for Lebanese women.

And yet, incremental progress for Lebanese women in politics has had little impact on breaking stereotypes and reducing levels of discrimination as demonstrated in this report. The voices, perspectives, and experiences of these seven Lebanese female politicians are evidence that there is still much work to do.

3. PROFILES OF LEBANESE WOMEN IN POLITICS

Profiles of the women interviewed are summarized below, alphabetically by last name.

3.1 Myrna Boustani

Myrna Boustani was the first woman elected to parliament in the history of Lebanon. It was 1963, and her father, Emile Boustani, had been tragically killed in a plane crash off the coast of Beirut. Boustani took her father's seat in an uncontested election. In her acceptance speech, she said "The arrival of women into this council is a realization of an idea that my father had always presented from this rostrum…".

Boustani had been parachuted into this role. She completed the remaining year of her late father's term and left politics in 1964. The now well-known Lebanese saying that women only enter parliament in Lebanon "wearing black," meaning as wives or daughters of the deceased, began with Boustani. Boustani recognizes that this would not have been the case if she had had a brother.

Her short tenure ensured that she was treated with a modicum of respect, but had she continued down a political path, she was certain that her father's legacy would have taken a back seat to pervasive patriarchal views and discrimination. She made an attempt to advocate for revision of the electoral law to allow for fair representation, and was met with a rebuttal.

Boustani has since channeled her passion for advocacy into the arts and today she remains optimistic about the role of women in politics in the country. She was born into politics and inherited her role, but Boustani argues that "being a woman, I always believed I could do more, achieve more." Although no longer involved in politics, Boustani's legacy carries significant weight. She paved the way for Lebanese women to be represented in a space once dominated by men and played an important role in championing the cause of women's rights in Lebanon.

3.2 Inaya Ezzeddine

Inaya Ezzeddine has many "firsts" to her name. She was the first woman to become a member of the Political Bureau of the Amal Movement , the first female minister of the Amal Movement as Minister of State for Administrative Reform, and the first woman parliamentarian representing the Shia community.[22]

Ezzeddine was also the first minister to wear a hijab. As a result, the discrimination she experienced was two-fold: as a woman, and as someone wearing hijab. She recalls being the only woman wearing a hijab at the American University of Beirut's Faculty of Medicine, where she graduated as a physician. "I consciously and willingly made difficult choices in my life," she says, "and I always chose the hardest path."

She recognized discrimination at an early age, starting within her own family, and used it as a driver to succeed. She maneuvered her transition to private school to better her education, skipping grades to advance quickly. Ezzeddine has consistently maintained her leadership in politics alongside her spirituality. Her passion for politics and public affairs led to her search for an ideology that aligns with her values and would allow her to serve the war-torn country. She actively sought enlightened interpretations of religion, building a foundation in social justice that would serve as a base for her political life.

Ezzeddine also defied custom as a divorced woman, opting to live alone with her two daughters rather than return to the family home. She overcame considerable obstacles to benefit from education and professional opportunities abroad to enhance her career, bringing her daughters with her as she traveled. In 2000, despite significant challenges, many of which related to her being a woman, she opened her own medical laboratory in Lebanon. And in 2009, she was nominated for the political bureau of the Amal Movement, launching her formal political career.

22 Lebanese political party

"I wanted to succeed because I [was] the only woman in the [Hariri] government, and because the eyes of the community and the women were on me.... I had to be a role model." Ezzeddine also sought to demonstrate that women can do much more than focus on "women's affairs only," including, for example in her role as the Minster of the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform where she worked on reform strategies including digital transformation and anti-corruption.

In 2018, Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament Nabih Berri asked Ezzeddine to run in the parliamentary election as a candidate for the Amal Movement representing Tyre. She became the first Shia woman in the Lebanese parliament and won her seat again in 2022. Despite this, she said that she seeks to be "a representative of all Lebanese people," working to improve lives for all citizens.

For women in particular, Ezzeddine argues that the rampant sexual harassment is an impediment to justice and equality. She believes that women's rights, including political participation, must be institutionalized through relevant laws promoting women's participation and empowerment. She continues to push boundaries, and argues that women are supported only when they remain within the confines of the status quo and follow social rules – something that must change. "When you speak of equality and discuss ideologies that require radical changes, things become more difficult."

3.3 Raya Haffar El Hassan

Raya Haffar El Hassan was the first woman to be made Finance Minister in 2009 and then the first woman appointed as Minister of the Interior in 2019. She was not only the first for Lebanon, she was the first for the entire Arab world.

El Hassan was born to progressive parents and spent parts of her childhood abroad, due to the Civil War. She received her undergraduate degree from the American University of Beirut and her graduate degree from the George Washington University in the US. She returned to Lebanon in 1991 and was recruited into political life during a time of hopeful reconstruction following the war. El Hassan married who she describes as an open-minded man and had three daughters.

"Women should not feel that their success in politics will come at the expense of their relationships or partners' feelings ...The right balance is required." At the same time, she knew that in the Arab world the "notion of proper division of labor is not fully internalized." El Hassan tells stories of bearing the brunt of family and domestic responsibilities, even as she served as minister.

As a political figure, El Hassan advocated for reform of public institutions, believing that these reforms will provide a segue for building trust between the government and citizens and ultimately lead to provide a segue for building trust between the government and citizens and ultimately lead to more equitable economic development. She encountered from the beginning discrimination in her public sector advisory roles: "We did all the work and then they left us behind. It was still a man's world." Political structures remained highly patriarchal, and patronizing attitudes common. "Even a man with a lower rank was more listened to," she explains. El Hassan believes that the best way forward is to find more women willing to fearlessly enter politics, confront these behaviors, and pave the way for other women.

She did acknowledge that 10 years after her appointment as Minister of Finance, when she was approached to serve as Minister of Interior, her hesitation in accepting the position was less pronounced as she felt that she had a more thorough understanding of the political dynamics in Lebanon and a better knowledge of the workings of the Lebanese public sector challenges proving that "practice" and experience build the confidence of women in assuming critical positions and remove the self-imposed barriers to accepting such roles.

In the early days of her tenure as Minister of the Interior, she advocated for civil marriage in Lebanon. The backlash was overwhelming, and she received serious threats. El Hassan held her position. She also raised the issue of child marriage and says that she "was not surprised to have been met with equal resistance."

Her political turning point was the nationwide uprising beginning in October of 2019. As Minister of the Interior, she has received criticism for how she handled the protests. El Hassan was subjected to on-line harassment, bullying, and attacks — including from women. Comments were sexist and derogatory, and she laments that women's groups did nothing to support her during this time. She explains that she was torn between her own values — mostly

aligned with the protesters — and her role as minister to remain impartial, ensure stability and avoid nationwide civil strife. She left the position in 2020 when a new government was formed.

Ultimately, El Hassan's political style was to remain participatory and build consensus, even if men sometimes saw this as a sign of being "soft." The blatant discrimination and sexual harassment she experienced was a clear indication that more work needs to be done to change the perception of men towards women and convince them of the critical role women play in political life and economic development.

3.4 Nada Boustani Khoury

Nada Boustani Khoury was the first woman to become Minister of Energy and Water in Lebanon. She was also the first woman to be pregnant and deliver while in office, demonstrating that having a successful career and a family are not mutually exclusive. Khoury was raised during the Civil War, where she experienced, along with her family, the atrocities of this period. Despite her mother's active political role at this time, Khoury became politically active only when she went to university.

As a result of the war, Khoury and her family spent five years in France. She returned to Lebanon, graduated from high school and pursued a degree in economics and a Masters in management at ESCP-Europe Grande Ecole de Commerce Paris - France. This was her introduction to political life. Her political and professional perspectives were strongly influenced by her school and work experiences in Europe.

Khoury fights for a unified personal status law. She believes that Lebanon should be governed by civil laws. This includes the right to an option of civil marriage, the right to nationality, and an end to girl-child marriages. Khoury is the mother of two daughters, and says "every day I see how unequal my daughters are compared to boys."

In 2010, Khoury joined the Ministry of Energy and Water in hopes that she could serve her country and her people. "Half the time I needed to speak louder to be heard," she says. "Meetings were happening that I was never asked to join." When in meetings, men were not comfortable with her presence. They assumed that as a young woman, she was only there "because the minister is doing a favor [for] someone." "Even though it should not be this way," she said, "the reality is we [have to] work twice as hard as the men to make ourselves respected and heard."

Khoury continued to fight to make herself heard, while also bearing the brunt of domestic responsibilities at home. At the same time, she struggled to ensure that her family role did not impede her work. While pregnant, she continued her work and hardly took the leave to which she was entitled. This would not have been the case "in a less patriarchal society."

Khoury is now a Member of Parliament, having won a seat in the 2022 elections. "Men aren't going to raise these issues for us. If we want change, more women need to be in parliament." She adds that "nothing in Lebanon encourages women to enter politics. From her house to the political environment, the patriarchy is too deeply rooted."

3.5 Chantal Sarkis

Chantal Sarkis was the first woman to become Secretary General of a Lebanese political party, the Lebanese Forces, and understood very early on that the gateway to politics were political parties.

Sarkis was raised in a conservative household. Although her father — a military character — was not open-minded, she attributes her love of politics to him. The war also played an important role in her choice to pursue a career in politics and public service. At age 19, she wrote a series of reports to a newspaper on the internal structures of political parties in the country. This solidified her passion.

During her work conducting door to door surveys, she learned about Lebanon, its people, and its diversity. She took on a range of jobs and internships to support herself and fund her studies. In 2005, Sarkis was recruited into the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, where she went on to build a name for herself in the country and the Arab region as an electoral expert. "It was not easy for me, as a young Arab woman," she says. "I had to impose myself and take myself very seriously... I had to be firm and exude confidence in a room usually full of men."

She went on to start a family of three children, earn a PhD, and establish an NGO in Akkar, her region of origin. The Akkar Network for Development sought to counter the conservative and patriarchal views of the area through women's protection from violence and empowerment. At that time, she also moved into

the United Nations Special Coordinator's Office in Lebanon, a more senior role that put her on the front-lines with high-level politicians.

Throughout her career, she was not immune to harassment and rumors. She laments that women — particularly young women — are viewed with disdain in political offices. The assumption is that she is an assistant, or that she is a love interest of a male politician. Accusations are often that a female politician reached her position through a sexual relationship, as a "politician's mistress". It is hardly ever believed that a woman is there in her own right. During her work with Lebanese Politicians at the United Nations, "I had to explicitly tell them that I am [here] to talk politics and not to have an affair with you

At the same time, Sarkis struggled to balance her work and family life. Despite her supportive husband, she continued to feel the social pressures of a family role.

In 2016, Sarkis became the first female Secretary General of a political party in Lebanon, managing a party with a military background where most of the older partisans were male ex-fighters. She was very conscious of how others perceived her as a woman in this position, and she knew how to build a good relationships with the deputies Secretary General and with the different generations of the party with mutual respect.

Sarkis believes that Lebanese men in politics are insecure when it comes to women entering their perceived space. She argues that a passion for politics is innate, it cannot be taught. It is "not a job, it is a lifetime investment," she says. She recognizes that most men inherit or pay for their political positions, and that women have to work far harder to succeed.

The October 2019 uprising was a turning point in Sarkis' political career. She realized that she was no longer in a place that reflected her values and beliefs. She left the position in 2020. She founded Stone Consultancy and became advisor to Nahwa Al Watan, an electoral platform that provided technical support to the change movement groups during the campaign of the 2022 parliamentary elections.

3.6 Paula Yacoubian

Paula Yacoubian is the first woman to be elected as a Member of Parliament from a civil society list, meaning she became Lebanon's first independent female candidate in 2018.

Her upbringing was both nationally and religiously diverse. Her father was a survivor of the Armenian genocide, and her mother was a former nun. This, along with the Civil War, fueled her political passions. Her education was frequently disrupted by the war. She recognizes that this is not unlike what Lebanese youth are experiencing today as Lebanon continues to spiral downward. "It is a war... but by other means!"

Her politics was also marked by the assassinations of prominent Lebanese politicians: president-elect Bachir Gemayel in 1982, and prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. She was also marked by the sight of foreign troops entering Lebanon in 1990. Yacoubian was 14 years old at the time.

A few years later, in 1993, Yacoubian would enter the world of TV presentation. She began her studies in political science while spending every day at the station. "I loved being in the newsroom," she said. "I eagerly followed global news and politics...this is how I made my debut in the political world."

During her TV career, she pioneered the first news program in Armenian, a tribute to her late father. Yacoubian advanced in her TV career, moving to different stations and more visible and senior roles. In 2004, she was married in a civil ceremony in Tunisia. She divorced 10 years later and continued to champion the right to civil marriage in Lebanon, advocating for a civil marriage law.

She hosted a well-known talk show called "Interviews" for over a decade until she resigned live on air in 2018. That same year, she entered politics. Her interest was galvanized during the 2015 waste management crisis and also was inspired by the 2016 municipal elections where she saw that Lebanese appeared ready to vote for those who offer them a real alternative to the ruling class.

Although she had been raising political issues for many years through her media role, she ran for office in order to have greater influence and opportunity to serve her country and its citizens. Yacoubian was elected to the Lebanese Parliament in 2018, one of only six women to have won a seat, and elected again in 2022 – one of eight women.

During her campaign and throughout her service, Yacoubian experienced online violence and other forms of harassment, including allegations from her opponents. Within parliament, she experienced discrimination and gained insight to the hypocrisy of the system, with its underhanded deals and alliances. She was disappointed and frustrated with the corruption.

Moreover, Yacoubian lamented the role of women in parliament, some of whom "represent their parties, not women nor their society." She believes that the situation can only advance through feminist representation in the legislature, recognizing that feminist men also have a role to play. "I'd rather have a feminist man defending the rights of women in the Parliament than an obedient woman reflecting a negative image of female representation" she says.

Yacoubian has held her ground, despite smear campaigns launched against her. "My genitals are none of your business," she has strongly stated. She argues that a temporary quota is necessary to break the glass ceiling, and women should continue to fight against any attempts to hold them back or discredit their name.

3.7 Salam Yamout

Salam Yamout is the first woman to be elected President of a Lebanese political party, the National Bloc, an established political party inactive since the Civil War and reactivated in the wake of the 2018 parliamentary elections.

Yamout was born into a politicized family of leftist parents whose political disagreement eventually led to their divorce. As a result, she hated politics. Yamout was raised between her parents' communist ideals and her aunt's Sunni traditional values. Her father exerted great influence, encouraging her and her sister to be strong, independent, empowered.

This upbringing laid the foundation for her belief in equality and justice. Yamout inherited leftist values without a party dogma. Her anchor was in public service first.

She was sent to school in France, excelling in math and science. She later studied computer engineering, becoming the early prototype for Arab women in STEM, a rarity both then and now. Her engineering program in the US was comprised of 55 students, of which only three were women. Her overseas experience was challenging but gave her an understanding of Western cultural and social mores and women's liberation.[24] As a woman she was in the minority in her field. Through these experiences, she learned of the importance of building alliances with other women.

Yamout's life changed in 1992 with her marriage. She became a diplomat's wife and left her career for many years, only returning in 2004 following her divorce. She explains that the lack of experience and the experience of implicit violence, as she calls it, "makes you doubt yourself" as it is harder to identify. Her marriage came at a very high price — to her mental health, to her career, and to her financial independence.

The challenges she faced helped fuel her views about the need to reform personal status laws. "All the misery that women are subjected to in Lebanon could be overcome just by deciding on a unified personal status law," she argues. This is about "changing the conditions women live in, not the culture."

Another major awakening for Yamout was her battle against breast cancer. She explains that until that point, her life had been in the service of others, but when she was diagnosed with cancer, she was forced to put herself first. "I had to fight for myself," she says.

Despite challenges to her health, she continued working. At that point, she was at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, advising the Prime Minister on information technology. Yamout remained in the Presidency until 2015. At the time, she was actively participating in protests as a result of the garbage crisis, until she was told that she should re-consider her allegiances and stop participating in protests". "That was my cue," she said. "I needed to exit the system. I tried to change it from the inside, like many others who tried, but I couldn't. It was time to try from the outside."

Yamout returned to the private sector as the regional director of the Internet Society. In 2018, inspired by the National Bloc's vision for a modern Lebanon with

23 Alongside the President and the Prime Minister, the Speaker has a large amount of power in the Lebanese Parliament. The post of Speaker is reserved for Shia Muslims.

24 STEM is the term used to refer to the academic disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

a civil state, she turned to politics, and was elected president — the first female president of the party.

"I never felt I was discriminated against for being a woman until I got into politics," she says.

> "Throughout the years, there were rare incidents here and there, but the real gender bias surfaced when I entered politics."

She argues that women not entering politics is not an indication of something wrong with women, but rather something wrong with politics. At the same time, politics is inherently gendered, and all gender issues are political.

Yamout advocates for women's inclusion, explaining that "women's leadership has been proven to be transformative. It is time to apply it in Lebanon."

3.8 Different experiences, shared motivations

Each of the seven women interviewed are trailblazers in their own right. They remain optimistic in the face of so many challenges and inspire hope for other women entering politics.

In sum, all the women interviewed speak of wanting to serve their country and improve the situation for women in Lebanon by working to bring about change either within their parties, or through their different political capacities. For several women, their career choice stemmed from wanting to work towards a better future for their children and wanting their children to be proud of their country. Building a better Lebanon for the next generation is a key motivating factor. Paving a way forward not only for their children, but for future generations of political leaders, is important to the group of women interviewed.

The women interviewed speak of the impact of Lebanon's Civil War and the war with Israel, and how these shaped their future political careers. The landmark 2015 and 2019 protests following the waste management crisis coupled with the worsening economic situation were also turning points for a few the women politicians interviewed. Against this deteriorating backdrop, their political activism was ignited.

Most relevant however, are the significant challenges the women face in their political careers. Every woman has experienced gender-based discrimination in some capacity, and every woman speaks of the difficulties they experience in navigating Lebanon's deeply traditional, patriarchal society.

The next section documents these barriers.

The fact that more Lebanese women are not entering politics is not a failure of women, rather it is an indication of structural imbalances and systemic discrimination inherent in Lebanon's political setup. "Nothing in Lebanon encourages women to enter politics," Khoury remarked. El Hassan even described politics in Lebanon as "the art of staying alive." Such is the harsh reality of being a woman in politics. This may very well be true everywhere, but in Lebanon, the challenges are particularly acute.

Indeed, common themes emerged from all seven interviews relating to challenges and barriers to political participation. A range of factors prevent women from participation and advancement including deeply patriarchal structures, legal barriers, traditional social norms, and violence against women in politics.

4. CHALLENGES

4.1 Patriarchy and discrimination remain pervasive

Despite its liberal appearance and reputation, Lebanon is a country in which patriarchy — and by extension, discrimination — is firmly entrenched in social norms, practices, and beliefs at every level. A 2017 survey commissioned by UN Women and Promundo found that nearly 60 per cent of Lebanese women had been sexually harassed.[25] In the same survey 75 per cent of male respondents agreed there should be more women in positions of authority, but 45 per cent of the same respondents also thought women are too emotional to be leaders. With such contradictory viewpoints it is clear that progress on the issue will be slow.

The patriarchal mentality means that Lebanese women in politics are not taken as seriously as similarly ranked men and they feel their voices are not heard. Even men with lower ranked positions are listened to more than women. Women, therefore, feel they need to work twice as hard as male colleagues to earn people's respect. For example, even as Yamout was receiving treatment for cancer, she ensured she had the least number of absences from work compared to her male colleagues. Khoury described being treated unequally and being given all the "donkey-work" while often being the first to arrive at 7am and the last to leave.

All of the women interviewed state a belief that male politicians continue to consider their positions to be more important than those of female politicians and give less weight to women's opinions — that women serve as ceremonial tokens to appease others calling for inclusion. As a university student, Ezzeddine realized early in her activism that "men believed that their position was far more important and women's presence in political parties was scarce and superficial. I believe that this mentality is still prevalent." El Hassan also believes the "patriarchal mentality is too entrenched." She suffered as a result of the patriarchal political structure and experienced "mansplaining" and patronizing treatment. Such treatment only motivates her to strive for better.[26] "Men...assumed high ranking positions in fields they had no solid experience in, and did so, without a blink of an eye" according to El Hassan "while women churn the idea over and over in their heads and still feel self-doubt."

Sarkis believes getting her PhD was less about being able to teach at university, and more about having 'Doctor' in her title to gain respect and help her assert herself in rooms full of men. Yamout felt the impact of a patriarchal system at multiple stages of her career. As an engineering student, she was in a program made up mostly of men. She also felt the pressure to conform to patriarchal expectations and quit her job in order to become a 'diplomat's wife'. These feelings of alienation fueled her political aspirations, however, and she dedicated time to educating herself on how best to make Lebanon a more inclusive society, with transformative women leaders at the helm.

Several of the women said they were discriminated against purely because they were women. Yamout recounted how she had never felt as discriminated against as a woman until she entered politics. That was the first time where she said to herself, "this is happening to me because I am a woman." Khoury recalled "half the time I needed to raise my voice to be heard. And when I raised my voice, they would say I was hormonal." The stereotype that women are excessively emotional and therefore unable to perform in their position was implied even though conversely, men screaming conveys their passion and conviction — a perception that is true globally.

The individual experiences described by the women interviewed reflect broader discriminatory and patriarchal attitudes that are commonly held across Lebanese society today. Lebanon's deep-rooted political structures are built on hegemonic masculinity and are inhospitable for women.[27]

It comes as no surprise then, that a gender analysis of Lebanon's 2017 Electoral Law commissioned by UN

25 El Feki, S., Heilman, B. and Barker, G., Eds. 2017. Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa: Executive Summary. Cairo and Washington, DC: UN Women and Promundo-US.

26 Mansplaining is a term used to refer to the explanation a man gives to a woman in a condescending and oversimplified manner.

27 Sharif, H. 2016. The Origin of Women's Segregation in Lebanon's Political Life: Between Patriarchy and Consociational Democracy. Beirut: Saint Joseph University.

Women, found that instead of promoting women's political participation, the law further impedes the prospects of women achieving meaningful political participation in Parliament.[28] Key issues of concern include the high registration fee for candidates; the election funding regulations which lead to unequal opportunities among parties and disfavor women candidates; the seat allocation and confessional distribution system which, due to the prevalent patriarchal culture, favors men over women; and the system for distributing votes using the electoral quotient which disproportionately benefits major parties and further undermines the chances of women being elected.

4.2 Women viewed as political tokens

There is a distinct difference between women's political presence and women's political power. Tokenistic displays of hollow progression are not infrequent and El Hassan laments that "it took quite a long time to be regarded as someone who is politically savvy enough to provide political advice."

In 2016, El Hassan was appointed as one of three Vice Presidents of the Future Movement. However, she was never asked to chair high-level meetings and was rarely consulted on political issues:

> It was a step in the right direction, and I welcomed it. But I also felt that I was appointed to give a progressive flare to a Sunni-dominated party. I was never asked to head a political bureau meeting. It was always one of the two male vice presidents who were asked to do so.

As a result, she arrived at the conclusion she one of the reasons for being appointed as a Vice President was a woman, and that tokenism was not lost on her. Female representation at the top echelon was important to the party but in reality, it was little more than a performance of progressive politics.

Some of the other women interviewed speak of experiencing similar tokenistic displays. Khoury pointed out that women's success and participation in political work in Lebanon is still closely linked to the decision and conviction of party leaders, who are male. Yamout confesses that she developed a "leading from behind" leadership style, without assuming authority, even when she had the rank. While nobody spoke explicitly of tokens, she felt it. Men would often talk to her aids in official meetings, not looking at her in the eyes. She found this very disconcerting.

Women who seek political positions have until recently often only been able to do so in relationship to deceased male politicians in their families — either as widows or as daughters of former politicians. Myrna Boustani was the first woman elected to parliament in 1963 but she noted this would not have been the case if she had a brother who could have taken her father's seat. While Boustani took on the role, she recalled being pressured to nominate herself for election to honor her father's legacy.

"Politics is a family business" she says, but hopes this will end because it perpetuates harmful practices that include parachuting women into their male relatives' seats. She believes this has damaged how women in politics have been viewed in Lebanon, despite the fact that politics is also a family business on the male side — with sons and male relatives following powerful men. Because there are so few women, and social norms dictate that they should be in the home, not in public spaces, the criticism they face for entering politics is immense, with any excuse used to find fault. Following in the footsteps of male family members then becomes an easy target to relegate women in politics as tokens — there to keep a seat warm and/or display a false image of change and modernity.

Such tokenism signals cosmetic gestures for women in politics and does not challenge the problematic patriarchal system that hinders women's meaningful participation. It also pits women against each other, with only a few 'women only' token spots available, aspiring female politicians understand they are competing against each other, rather than men. The fundamental structure, and the underlying nepotistic practices that fuel women's marginalization, instead need to be overhauled. Ezzedine, for example, has worked on several laws that contribute to achieving gender equality and promoting women's empowerment and participation. Her experience,

28 UN Women. 2021. A Gender Analysis of the 2017 Lebanese Electoral Law. UN Women and LADE. Available at: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/02/a-gender-analysis-of-the-2017-lebanese-electoral-law.

however, has taught her that women were supported as long as they didn't seek change or challenge the status quo. In effect, as long as they stayed away from the crucial issues. And from real politics.

4.3 The political system impedes women's advancement

As a religiously diverse — and religiously fractured — country, the arrangement of the government in a confessional system is theoretically designed to promote multi-party cooperation and prevent any religious community privilege over another. However, in practice, it has contributed to hindering progressive change on key women's rights issues. Many of the women interviewed speak to the disillusionment felt when attempts to change the system, or advance within, failed. It would appear, then, that entering such a setup is almost setting oneself up for failure.

Yamout dedicated six years of her life to the public sector, trying to advance structural reforms, but eventually gave up: "I tried changing it from the inside, like many others who tried, but I couldn't. It was time to try from the outside." She concluded that even the few leaders who genuinely advocated for reform were chained to the system — the system itself needed changing with a new social contract between the citizens and the state.

Yacoubian was inspired by the 2016 results of the "Beirut Madinati"success, believing that Lebanon was ready to vote for those who offered an alternative to the political elite.[29] However, upon entry into politics she quickly concluded that despite what the people might want, little will change because Lebanese politics is inherently patriarchal and propped up on a "thick layer of lies and charlatanism."

Yamout believes that "politics in Lebanon is dirty, and if it were cleaner, more women would have entered it." However, she goes on to say, "but with time I realized that it is in fact a two-way street: women need to enter into politics so it can clean itself, so we can clean it." And herein lies the inherent paradox that despite not yet being able to effect sufficient change from the inside, women must continue forging a path in the hopes that more women will enter politics in order to create the sea-change needed.

4.4 Social norms reinforce traditional gender roles

Strong familial systems are the backbone of Lebanese society, and these are couched in rigid gender roles and beliefs surrounding expected behavior. Hegemonic understandings of gender in Lebanon place women in the domestic sphere and, even with the most progressive of support systems, women continue to straddle tradition and modernity. As one example, El Hassan states that no matter how far a woman rises in her career and no matter how much work-related responsibilities she has to carry, in the Arab World, the expectation from society remains that women have to shoulder most of the household responsibilities, and the division of labor in the household remains far from being balanced or fair.

A 2017 survey confirmed the widespread inequality in sharing household duties with only 26 per cent of ever-married Lebanese men helping with domestic tasks such as laundry and cleaning, while women carried out the vast majority of daily childcare.[30] Before the COVID-19 crisis, it was estimated that "women in Arab states spend a daily average of 329 minutes on unpaid care work and 36 minutes on paid work while men spend 70 min and 222 min respectively."[31] COVID-19 has only exacerbated this as emergency measures were gender blind to structural inequalities and failed to account for the gendered social repercussions. With mass shutdowns, women were expected to carry out additional unpaid labor such as home-schooling while also attending to formal jobs. The crisis exposed a gendered division of labor that assumes childcare and domestic work is the woman's role.

Khoury also notes that she has unconditional support from her husband, but continues to have duties in the home that only she can manage. No matter what position women attain, they still bear the brunt of the domestic work. These women work long hours in high powered jobs and still have to organize and take care of the children, prepare dinner, buy groceries, and manage the household. Striking the balance between career and motherhood often means working two jobs — even more if that career is in politics. This is a significant factor in the tension between the women's rights movement and the movement for

29 Beirut Madinati is a grassroots political movement founded in 2015 in response to deteriorating social conditions. The group ran for municipal elections in 2016 and inspired other independent political activity to challenge traditional powers.

30 El Feki, S., Heilman, B. and Barker, G., Eds. 2017. Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa: Executive Summary. Cairo and Washington, DC: UN Women and Promundo-US.

31 Chebaro, A. 2020. The Gendered Dimension of COVID-19 in Lebanon. Beirut, Lebanon: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

domestic workers rights in Lebanon; the challenges and work involved in renegotiating gendered roles in the household, and demanding equality in care work from men, are often forfeited and replaced by systems of exploitative labor – thereby allowing women to 'have it all' and 'do it all', but only on the backs of low paid foreign female labor.

These social norms that place women's role in the domestic sphere shape attitudes that politics is not an appropriate career path for women, and that their involvement in politics can be detrimental to their families and children. Yacoubian's family objected to her studying political science in university after her mother told her it was not a suitable field for women. Similarly, Sarkis' father believed women represented in the media are tainted and, after she enrolled to study political science, he said a woman in political science would never find a job and would never succeed without concessions.

Such perceptions inform patriarchal institutions meaning they are not designed with women in mind and have far-reaching implications for women's participation in politics. For example, there is a lack of private areas in government institutions for pregnant or breastfeeding women to rest or pump milk. El Hassan asserts organizations need to be attentive to such needs. Additionally, she laments the short maternity leave in Lebanon which was only increased to 10 weeks in 2014 and still falls below minimum international labor standards.[32] Sarkis returned to work just 28 days after giving birth.

Compounded with the internalized division of labor in Middle Eastern societies, is the pressure placed on women for "working too much" and "neglecting [their] family." The women interviewed described the guilt they were made to feel and how they constantly need to navigate such traditional views of women's role in society. El Hassan accepts that guilt is part of the job description, while Khoury remarked "I am a mother and have a family and have work responsibilities and I am still torn as to how to portray this in the right way." Having a successful career and a family are not mutually exclusive and these women want to be the proof of that. Four of the women politicians speak of the perception among their male colleagues that women are unable to juggle motherhood and high-ranking political positions. The women expressed how they were constantly contending with the assumption that women must choose. Such a binary assumption fails to see that the crux of the matter is actually in the need for greater childcare provision, paternity leave, and better division of household labor so as to enable women to do both.

Khoury says that Lebanese women are still largely encouraged by their families to quit their jobs once they get married to look after their husbands, or at least when they become pregnant to take care of the children. Khoury was the first Arab woman to be pregnant and deliver a child while assuming a ministerial position, and she knew her pregnancy would be used against her. When she had told her colleagues and family at the time that she was pregnant, she was told that it will be very hard to handle motherhood and work. To prove that she could do both, she answered work calls and emails while in labor and returned to work immediately after giving birth. She reflected that in a less patriarchal society she could have enjoyed the arrival of her child and spent more time bonding with her daughter instead of worrying about overcoming perceptions about women's roles.

Ezzeddine defied custom by living alone after her divorce, raising her two daughters while also being acutely aware of her own medical and political careers. She chose to balance all of these, while also embracing her role as a single mother. She sought success with her daughters — not at their expense. "I did everything a traditional mother would do," she said, "but I wasn't a traditional mother." She traveled the world with her daughters, raising them "as world citizens, while developing their humanitarian values and capabilities."

Sarkis was told by her boss to focus on the baby, something she worried would result in a demotion. Therefore, when he came to hospital to congratulate her after the birth, she gave a full briefing of the electoral law proposed that day to show she could do both. Every time someone asks her how she manages between work and family — a common question for female politicians — Sarkis cringes:

32 ILO (International Labour Organization). 2000. Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). Geneva: ILO.

> Men never get this question! Don't men in politics have families?? Don't they want to take their kids to soccer practice or to the pediatrician? Don't they want to read them a book? I hate this question because it feeds the gender stereotype in Lebanon and we need to desperately get rid of it.

4.5 Conflict and insecurity supersede feminism — and fuel activism

Women's political activity in Lebanon cannot be divorced from the context of conflict and perpetual insecurity in the country. Conflict, namely the Civil War, was a driving force for many of these women in igniting their political activism.

El Hassan recounted how the experience of the civil war and in particular the 1982 Israeli invasion scarred her — and the country — further distorting the political landscape, but it also motivated her political engagement. Women bear the brunt of wars and bear witness to atrocities yet are galvanized into action by supporting themselves, their families, their communities, and serving as the social safety net in times of hardship.

Khoury bore witness to her mother's political activism during the Civil War and was inspired by it. However, the trauma and the conflict left a bitter taste in her mouth. She initially eschewed politics, saying that her scars ran too deep. "I was raised in a bomb shelter like all of my generation," she says. She believes healing will not happen through the current political system but is determined to work for a civil, decentralized system that will promote reconciliation.

Ezzeddine's commitment to social justice, and her belief in social and humanitarian issues, underlie her engagement in politics. This cannot be separated from the context of conflict in which she was raised. Though she was born and raised in Beirut, early in her childhood witnessed what she perceived to be the striking inequalities and the marginalization of the south of Lebanon where she comes from, combined with Israeli attacks and bombardment of villages culminating in 1982 in the invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut. During this period Ezzeddine joined the Red Cross as a volunteer, working to bring humanitarian assistance to the people in Beirut. These experiences shaped her sense of injustice, her character and her social and political opinions. She would share her political opinions at a young age, even as her family deemed these to be "for men only." "My parents were afraid of politics," she recalls. "They preferred to stay under the radar to avoid problems during the difficult times the country was going through."

Sarkis' uneasy childhood coupled with the violence of the war left an indelible mark. She explains that memories of the Civil War remain very vivid in her mind and both the violence of the war and the difficult atmosphere within her home contributed to her fractured childhood. At the same time, she recognizes that the war played a critical role in her decision to pursue a career in politics and public service. Despite a difficult relationship with her father, seeing him in the army and listening to him discuss politics was instrumental. So much so, that she attributes her love of politics to him.

Yacoubian was born into war, recalling running to the shelter for protection when bombardments intensified. She became used to the sounds of war and her education was frequently disrupted by rockets and armed confrontations. She is also the daughter of genocide survivors which impacted how she was raised. Her exposure to conflict and trauma growing up informs her social justice worldview and these experiences cannot be divorced from her commitment to her activism.

Today, conflict persists — and in new forms too. Women are subjected to violence and conflict in myriad ways but at the same time, the existence of conflict — and the national struggle — tends to supersede the feminist struggle. As a conflict-prone state, women's rights and advancing women's participation in politics are either not prioritized, or are entirely absent from the political agenda. This supposed "tyranny of the urgent" has put women's demands for their rights in second place. El Hassan even mentions the security incident of June 2019, where her security team prevented her from attending the scene after a lone gunman blew himself up, as an example of how little men understand women's experiences in conflict. As a result, related policy is gender blind and does not serve or protect women's interests.

4.6 Women's lack of self-confidence hinders their progress

Several of the women interviewed speak about not feeling adequate despite being qualified and suitable for their respective roles.

Upon hearing she would be appointed as Minister of Finance, El Hassan lost sleep and experienced panic attacks because she did not feel confident that she could do the job. She feels that because she had to switch from technical policy to maneuvering Lebanese political dynamics, she was not convinced of her abilities. Everyone around her had full confidence in her, but she suffered from "serious self-doubt" she says.

Lebanese women in politics are a minority and being outnumbered means they are constantly being discounted. There were many instances where decisions were made and actions were taken without consultation which led El Hassan to feel like she was not "part of the club" of men in politics. She notes how there is a need for more women in politics to "eliminate that awkward feeling."

Khoury describes a scenario where she was made to feel incapable and inadequate by her colleagues:

I was invited to the meeting. They were not comfortable with my presence. I was 27 years old, but I knew the file inside out. I knew I understood as much as they did and even more, but they made me doubt myself all the time. Although deep down I knew my knowledge was superior to theirs, they made me feel like I knew nothing. The self-confidence I had worked so hard on in France was crushed in the matter of seconds.

Such an example was not uncommon throughout her career so when she was asked to become minister, she met the news with trepidation:

> We always underestimate ourselves as women. We don't believe in ourselves enough. We undersell ourselves and underestimate our capabilities. And when the opportunity comes, we get scared and worried.

This is true of women globally. Women are more likely than men to think of themselves as underqualified for positions. Evidence shows that this holds women back from applying for certain positions, particularly senior roles.[33] Khoury sums it up nicely: "Few are the women with an ego, and few are the men without one."

Yamout even went so far as to say, "the greatest impediment to a woman's success is herself." Essentially, she believes women need self-confidence to succeed in politics. While this may not necessarily be the greatest impediment, it is certainly a factor and can be remedied by mechanisms such as training programs, mentorships, and enabling environments.

4.7 Violence against women continues unabated

Misogyny and sexual harassment from male politicians is pervasive in Lebanon. All the women profiled experienced some form of gender-based violence as female politicians and several speak of the need for women in politics to develop thick skin in order to survive. A study on women's experiences running for Parliament in the 2018 elections found that 78 per cent of female candidates were the victims of different forms of violence including threats, online abuse, ridicule and harassment, beatings, property damage, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rumors of a sexual nature.[34] The most prominent setting for such violence was online, with 60 per cent of candidates receiving abuse on social media.

In 1963 when Boustani raised the need to reform the electoral law to make it more inclusive, an attack campaign was launched against her and she was surprised that even her fathers' friends who had convinced her to take his seat did not support her. When Ezzedine was running for Parliament, her opponents distributed leaflets and launched coordinated social media campaigns against her to discourage people from voting for her because she is a woman. When Khoury became minister, she was the target of many attacks and believes that this is because women in politics are soft targets and easier to attack than male colleagues. While she worked to shield her children from politics, her daughters were also frequently mentioned in cruel social media smear campaigns.

The violence the women were subjected to was so pervasive that it had a profound impact on their

33 Tockey, D. and Ignatova, M. 2022. Gender Insights Report: How Women Find Jobs Differently. LinkedIn Talent Solutions.

34 El Kaakour. H. 2020. *Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation: Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections*. UN Women. Available at: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/02/pursuing-equality-in-representation-in-lebanon-2018-elections

children. Sarkis, El Hassan, and Yacoubian speak of their children worrying about their mothers' safety as politicians. Sarkis knew early on that being a politician in Lebanon was a dangerous job, but she was not expecting her then nine-year-old son to ask her whether her life would be in danger when she became Secretary General. Her son knew that targeted assassinations of Lebanese politicians was common, and he was worried about his mother. Yacoubian's son was also fearful for his mother's safety especially when he received threats and intimidating messages about her both on social media and on his private mobile phone.

El Hassan explains that as her daughters grew up, they became more conscious of her public role. They too were aware that character assassinations as well as physical assassinations happened frequently in Lebanese politics. They distinctly remembered when Prime Minister Rafik Hariri — their mother's mentor and former boss — was killed in 2005 and so when El Hassan was first appointed as Minister of Finance in 2009, her daughters were terrified. They automatically associated their mother's ministerial appointment with death. "I lied to them" she says, "I told them they would never assassinate women."

As Minister of Interior, El Hassan's response to the 2019 protests garnered intense criticism and backlash on social media, and much of it was sexist in nature. El Hassan thinks that those making the abusive and derogatory comments would not have used the same kind of sexist and violent language about a male minister. She believes that many of the protestors were not able to reconcile the image of a woman, and in particular a mother, with that of the Minister of Interior.

Sarkis was the subject of frequent harassment and smear campaigns on social media. She says, "until a serious change of culture is introduced and awareness is raised, a successful woman in politics in Lebanon will always be accused of dating someone for getting to the position she did." She stresses that she has worked hard all her life to build her career, and she would not be detracted by persistent rumors seeking to undermine her. She was, however, sad that her family and children had to hear these lies about her.

Yacoubian wrongly thought that the hate speech, threats, and smear campaigns against her would subside once she was elected. On the contrary, they increased once she entered Parliament. When she announced her candidacy, personal and sexual allegations were circulated by her opponents. Amongst other things she was accused of leading a prostitution network and her son was described as illegitimate. These types of allegations are different to the smear campaigns against male politicians.[35] The threats and intimidation did not end when she resigned from Parliament. She continued to be criticized and received comments in relation to her appearance and sexuality — she was even described as "everyone's breast-feeder." When asked how she would react if her erotic films were to be released, she was not intimidated and said her body is private and not for discussion or comment. Not every woman politician is as comfortable tackling such sexism and harassment head-on, however, and the culture of impunity for this behavior continues.

Sarkis also feels that men's views of women in politics are sexist: "this is always the case when a young woman wants to work in a political office, people often assume that the only reason she could be there is because one of the men has a personal interest in her." She recounts that at the beginning of her career she had to repeatedly send signals that she was married and was there to work. Sarkis says it was exhausting but necessary.

Some of the other women profiled also speak of the importance of always maintaining a professional appearance as they would be judged on how they dressed. Sarkis emphasizes that in Lebanese politics image is important and women in high-level political positions need to dress appropriately, as their male counterparts do not take them as serious interlocutors but rather as a woman they can flirt with. "How we dress as women in politics, especially in the Arab world, is a serious issue that can sometimes make or break us" she says. Khoury similarly feels the need to dress classically and with limited makeup otherwise she would get inappropriate comments, especially from the media.

El Hassan, as a young woman in politics, also felt scrutinized under the misogynist microscope of aged, seasoned, male politicians. She describes Parliament as a boys' club and was appalled at the language directed towards her. She says some Parliamentarians from conservative areas who had not previously engaged in political discussions with women would openly make sexual remarks in the middle of the

35 Ibid

Lebanese Parliament. Comments were usually in relation to how she was dressed that day, her smile, or her looks. Although she was more inclined to wear trouser-suits, when she did wear skirts, she was always self-conscious "not to give the wrong impression." Even though El Hassan is resolute that no woman should mold her behavior to that of a man, she does concede the consideration that had to be given to appearance due to the sexist comments.

4.8 Lack of solidarity among women

Three of the women who experienced intense online violence, threats, and sexists smear campaigns were disappointed with what they believe was a lack of support from the other female politicians when they were being attacked and subjected to discriminatory behavior.

Khoury received sexist comments not only from men but also from other female Members of Parliament. Khoury found this to be more hurtful than the comments from men:

> Any woman minister or MP must not condescend and direct sexist comments to another woman minister or MP, no matter how different we are in politics. We must not attack each other or hurt each other because we would be hurting ourselves collectively and hindering us all from reaching higher places in politics.

El Hassan says that when she encountered online bullying, sexual harassment, and threats in both of her ministerial portfolios, she never received any support from other colleagues or women's groups which advocate on gender equality in politics. She says:

> The level of attacks being waged against me transcended any political or confessional views or stance. They were purely sexist. But no one really came out and said that.

El Hassan says that "the only way to change this behavior is to have more women in high level positions" but as it is still a male dominated space, women must expect it and try to change it. "You can either confront it or ignore it" she continues. Even though she chose to ignore it, she adds that the only woman who condemned the sexist attacks was Paula Yacoubian, an act of solidarity that she will never forget.

Yacoubian herself speaks of feeling alone when male colleagues launched misogynistic and sexist campaigns against her and none of the other women parliamentarians would say anything. Yacoubian believes that female politicians "...rarely depart from their party's guidelines and policies, even when these are at the expense of their rights as women or when they have a different opinion". Such behavior and the lack of solidarity among female politicians is not helping feminist representation in Lebanese politics and "things will not move forward" she says. In this sense building networks and support structures is vital. El Hassan calls it a "sisterhood pact" and recommends a code of conduct for women which will enable and increase female solidarity, thus introducing a new culture among women in decision-making positions.

Khoury commented that she wished she had received support from female leaders and activists when she was subjected to intense attacks or when her children were referred to in smear campaigns against her. El Hassan also believes that it is essential for women NGOs to be more supportive of women politicians and come out collectively against sexist red lines, even if they did not agree with their political stance. In other words, there are certain boundaries that should not be crossed and if they are, there needs to be more support in place.

5. ENABLING PARTICIPATION THROUGH SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND STRATEGIES

Aysha Taryam, the first Arab female Editor-in-Chief of The Gulf Today, is a writer, liberal campaigner, and advocate for women in politics. She says:

> There needs to be a fundamental shift in the way societies view women in government, one that does not see them as mere seat-fillers or stats on a chart, they must be viewed as a vital contributing factor to the betterment of the world.

There is no doubt that achieving change requires a long fight and a lifetime commitment, and these interviews are a reminder that there is still a lot of work to be done. Women leadership can be transformative but deep-rooted beliefs and practices embedded in a rigid patriarchal structure leaves little space for meaningful change. As Yamout put it, even if there were a few leaders who genuinely wanted to reform and had good intentions, they were chained to the system, and it is the system itself that needs changing.

Many factors interact to enable greater participation but this needs to be married to practical strategies. Women need provision of support services and equitable access to them. Despite the myriad obstacles to women's political participation, the women interviewed have hope and remain optimistic. With hope comes determination and they all have ideas, recommendations, and strategies on how to change the system.

5.1 Women in politics benefit from strong support systems

Many of the women speak of supportive families and partners as an anchor for their political careers. El Hassan even notes "Lebanon's advantage has always been the support system available, whether it is through family, friends, or help." In fact, in Lebanon it would be impossible — or highly unlikely — for women to be able to pursue careers in politics if families and partners were in opposition.

El Hassan had the influence of two working parents who were progressive and demonstrated the need to work hard, overcome challenges, and to be self-sufficient: "This is how we grew up. Knowing that we had two working parents." Despite her father's conservative upbringing, he was adamant about his daughters' independence and raised them to focus on their own empowerment and independence — even after marriage. Such an environment, coupled with the support of her progressive husband, impacted the way El Hassan raised her own daughters. El Hassan was also strongly influenced by the time she spent overseas. Her experience in Washington DC at the George Washington University exposed her to diversity, tolerance, and co-existence. These were critical lessons that she would then try to apply in a fractured Lebanon.

Khoury recognizes — and credits — her family in general, and her husband in particular, for being supportive and giving her the foundation upon which she was able to pursue a political career. She also recognizes that women who have supportive family structures have it better and should be more able to actively seek positions of leadership and decision-making. And yet,

not enough women choose to pursue this path: If we have all this support available to us, we need to be able to have more women choose politics and higher-level decision-making positions yet for some reason we haven't been able to turn that to our benefit.

Yamout grew up straddling two ideological worlds and the core values instilled in her from an early age shaped her identity, giving her a strong grounding in public service. Her father influenced her the most and had very strong ideals about women's empowerment and independence. After his death, she drew on the support of her network of women friends and colleagues. So even though she says she tried to stay away from politics, her leftist upbringing, and time spent in France and the US, shaped her political aspirations in the end.

Yacoubian was married for 14 years to a media expert who was very supportive and played an integral role in advancing her career. Although they later divorced, she credits him with supporting her political aspirations. Yacoubian's family initially did not support the interreligious union which caused some friction but eventually it was accepted and reflects her parents' tolerance towards religious diversity.

Sarkis speaks of the "unparalleled" support she received from her husband and both of their families. They had help at home but made a point to always have one parent at home with the children. She says it was important to her that the children were "surrounded with [the] family support system." Ezzedine speaks of the support received by her mother and sister in the raising of her daughters, as fundamental to her daughters' well being and her ability to remain in employment and enter public service.

5.2 Everyone must support an enabling environment — not just women

El Hassan speaks to the importance of having an understanding partner and believes balance is key. Ultimately, a partnership between people, and between women and men, is needed to achieve an equal and just society. Khoury also called for a commitment to creating this partnership between men and women in order for society to function. Importantly though, a partnership is needed in order to end the culture of impunity and punish those who are discriminatory and sexist in politics.

Sarkis thinks men need to have self-confidence, an interest in politics, and security in order for the women in their lives to strive in politics. On the other hand, men in politics must learn how to be champions for women. Mentorship programs in how to better create enabling environments for women need to be resourced by political parties.

Moreover, the residual legacy issues related to the conflicts need to be addressed, particularly for women. Khoury urges for psychological and trauma units to be set up specifically for women so they can deal with their trauma and overcome their fears, without which, they will find it hard to jump into social life and politics. Sarkis talks about women in politics needing tools to handle gender issues and discriminations, but this requires training and specific techniques. Training and capacity building in political tactics will equip the women politicians to counter stereotypes and silence critics. Communications training, coalition building, public speaking, legislative duties, and constituent relations are all examples of training that could be carried out through gendered lenses. Such training — for men and women — will lead to greater awareness, engagement and, hopefully, equality.

The role of the media is an important consideration in creating an enabling environment for women politicians. The media's portrayal of women, women's rights, and women politicians could be drastically improved upon to be more positive, thereby normalizing this for society. With the prevalence of online harassment and bullying women politicians face online, the media should be cognizant of this and not contribute to the problem. At the same time, media training for the women politicians should be essential as several of the women interviewed mentioned the challenging relationship they had with the media due to lack of experience.

5.3 Young women need mentors and role models to become political actors

While Khoury recognizes that it took her many years to overcome the challenges she faced as a woman in politics, she acknowledges that "these challenges make us stronger as women." At the same time, she does not want to see young women discouraged from political roles because of this. "If we don't talk about these things, other young women would think that they are alone," she says. "I don't want them to feel alone. We all went through this." Creating space for

young women to enter politics is incredibly important because Khoury believes more women in politics will not only reduce corruption and discrimination, but it will also help prioritize women's issues.

Yamout similarly says that women in politics need to pave the way for young women to enter politics and by opening the door for younger generations, they may not have to struggle as much. Sarkis remarks that politics is innate and anyone looking to enter must "have it in them". Other women believe that it is possible to train young women to be more politically savvy. As such, women leaders adopting participatory decision-making and consensus building wields powerful results. Such role models are essential and can be highly influential as mentors. Ezzeddine recalls that she was a teenager when she was first attracted to political and public spaces by a role model in her life, and recognizes and accepts that she has responsibilities as a role model for other women:

> I wanted to succeed because I was the only woman in the government, and because the eyes of the community and the women were on me. I thought I had to be a role model, especially that my responsibilities were not only focused on women. I had to succeed to prove that women can work hard and succeed in any cause, not just in causes related to women's affairs.

El Hassan stresses the need to find women who are willing to fearlessly enter the political sphere and confront discriminatory behavior. These sentiments were echoed by Yacoubian who says, "speaking publicly about this specific form of violence is the only way to raise the awareness of the public and contribute to curbing future attempts."

Yamout strongly believes this too. Women need to step up, fight for what they want, face discrimination, and call it out. She says to "forget about 'ayb'" and believes women should surround themselves with other like-minded women so they can unite in pushing the envelope.[36] It also helps with crossing political divides and building consensus. Mentoring can help carve out clear political space for women, in particular through programs that provide specific support to women with political aspirations. Role modeling will also foster greater collaboration among women, resulting in stronger cross-sectarian political outcomes.

5.4 Quotas are a critical temporary measure

The underrepresentation of women in politics led many of the women interviewed to call for the implementation of gender quotas for leadership positions. There has been advocacy for this matter, and proposals put forward, including by Ezzeddine, but to date these have failed.

Yamout was initially opposed to quotas but educated herself on affirmative action and positive discrimination and is now convinced that it is imperative for political parties to adopt a quota. She believes that it is up to the parties to lead the mainstream towards change and even if some issues may sound unpopular at first, it is the responsibility of the emerging political parties to model change. El Hassan, on the other hand, believes quotas should be introduced starting at the municipal council level as this is where change starts — in the community. In any case, both women see a gender quota as a useful strategy in engaging more women in politics.

Khoury says "if we want change, more women need to be in Parliament so we can prioritize all the issues," and she appreciates the transitional environment a quota creates. She is, however, more skeptical towards quotas and thinks it would be yet another reason for parachuting women in the wrong places amounting to tokenistic displays. El Hassan is also wary of this and similarly recommends educating parties on the concept of tokenism, noting that meaningful engagement is not always guaranteed with quotas. Yacoubian suggests a temporary gender quota as there is an urgent need to break the glass ceiling, but she also argued for real feminist representation saying, "I'd rather have a feminist man defending the rights of women in the Parliament than an obedient woman reflecting a negative image of female representation."

Gender quotas should not be taken in isolation and should, as several women suggested, be incorporated

36 The Arabic word for inappropriate, often used to tell women how to behave, dress, or act in certain ways. A direct reflection of the patriarchal society women are brought up in.

in tandem with other policies to ensure long-term impact and meaningful change. Increasing the number of women in politics and decision-making positions is a good place to start, but it does not stop there. Ezzeddine argues in favor of institutionalizing women's political participation through relevant laws, including a quota.

Another consideration in making the political climate more accommodating is to institutionalize equality through relevant laws, as quotas on their own are not sufficient and run the risk of descending into tokenism. Enshrining protections into law will help tackle the corrupt and patriarchal political system and allow more women to enter politics. In addition to political participation legislation, all the women interviewed call for changes to the personal status laws and civil marriage laws.

5.5 Political parties can be a vehicle for women's participation

Yamout said all gender issues are political issues, and all political issues have a gender aspect to them. She believes the only way forward is to have more inclusive governance and leadership structures which means calling on girls and women across Lebanon to take a chance on the country. In other words, for change to happen, more women need to be in Parliament i.e., in decision making positions.

Khoury sees political parties as the natural vehicle for women to reach these high-level political positions. She advises women to identify with a political party or movement that is aligned with their values, and to work to rise within its ranks. In this way no one is parachuted in, and impact will be greater.

Yamout agrees that being part of a team, a party, or a movement is the most effective way for women to play the game of politics and destroy barriers stopping them from moving forwards and upwards. Pushing the limits and engaging in change-making will pave the way for more women to enter politics.

Yacoubian's role as an independent candidate believes representing the people is more important than representing the parties. She worries that using political parties as a strategy does not always fit as a course of action and may reinforce the existing sectarian system.

6. LEBANESE WOMEN IN POLITICS GOING FORWARD

The 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War has a deep legacy. Women, who did not have decision-making roles during the war or in any post war political dialogue process, paid the highest price. Even though they suffered invisibly, women still managed to exert themselves as agents of change and there are many examples of prominent women pioneering collective action and nonviolent movements. Lebanese women have always been active but, unfortunately, this has not always translated into advancement. There is evidence of separate, isolated movements from the Civil War that did not have the capacity to enforce large scale change.[37]

Trauma and suffering are deeply rooted, but so too is the patriarchal society that believes power lies with men and women are bound to social care. Building new contexts still seems difficult in the current system. In Lebanon, simply being a woman in politics is already a radical political act. But there is much more work to be done.

Khoury calls on all women who have political aspirations to put themselves forward without fear or hesitation. While she warns the path is difficult, ultimately, she believes not only that women can do it, but that they must do it. Engagement with political parties is a fundamental pathway for this. Moreover, greater female participation and solidarity can be aided by fostering better support networks and creating partnerships between women in politics and civil society. Connecting with global groups and international agencies that support women in politics and women Members of Parliament are also effective in connecting and creating a community in this regard. Women politicians face similar challenges globally and, by uniting to support each other, change can happen.

Ultimately, it is beyond dispute that women's representation makes a positive difference — not only for women, but for society as a whole. While not all women political actors are willing or able to act in favor of women's rights, overall women's leadership promotes equality and stability, paving the way for better social outcomes. Women are more likely to find common ground across party lines, which is critical to bridge Lebanon's sectarian divides that have destroyed the country for decades. When in positions of power, women are also more likely to promote social causes and finance social protection schemes, to the benefit of individuals, families, and communities.

Women's leadership builds greater stability, increasing the likelihood of peace. Studies have shown that peace is more likely when women are at the negotiating table. When women's parliamentary representation increases by five per cent, a country is almost five times less likely to respond to an international crisis with violence.[38] This is fundamental to a country like Lebanon, with its volatile politics and tendency towards violence. Women in parliament also decrease the risk of national-level violence, such as civil war.

Political engagement and activism is contagious. As more women enter politics in Lebanon, more women — particularly young women — will be inspired to do so. Creating more space for this and facilitating pipelines for young women to access politics is more important than ever. Granted, we cannot assume that

37 The Arab Institute for Women. 2022. Women Peacebuilders in Lebanese Civil War. [Video]. Accessed 23 February 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1l6aOmhfQoA.

38 Council on Foreign Relations. 2021. "Women's Power Index" Accessed 9 March 2022. https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index#chapter-title-0-3.

electing women will guarantee immediate change. Political presence does not necessarily bring with it political power. And women's political power does not necessarily bring feminist interests to the fore. However, while not a panacea, temporary special measures hold the potential to bring many women into politics, and as we have seen from political movements worldwide — representation matters.

According to an old saying, quoted in a speech by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, "when a woman comes into politics, woman changes. When many women come into politics, politics changes."[39]

39 National Democratic Institute. 2021. Changing the Face of Politics Podcast: Episode 2: Vanessa Nakate interviews Michelle Bachelet. [Podcast]. Accessed 9 March 2021. https://www.ndi.org/changing-face-politics-podcast-2

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