

Women, participation and peace in Lebanon

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There is widespread discrimination of women in Lebanon – politically, legally and in society in general. Lebanon’s legal system reflects and buttresses a patriarchal, sectarian socio-political order. This acts as a prism through which women’s roles, rights and responsibilities are perceived and defined in Lebanon, and so institutionalises and perpetuates the subordinate status of women in the country.

Women’s circumstances provide valuable insights into the nature of power in Lebanon, and the challenges and opportunities for change. Initiatives to support Lebanese women and improve their circumstances may also offer a platform to promote cross-sectarian collaboration; more broadly on key issues. Putting in place mechanisms and conditions aimed to systematically increase women’s participation in political life could have great benefits for women, but could also provide openings for new approaches to how democracy, justice and rights are understood and applied in Lebanon more broadly.

Women and politics

Lebanese structures of political representation, governance and democratic constituencies are ordered along sectarian and confessional lines. Furthermore, access to high levels of political power is dependent on familial ties and networks, specifically from male to male relatives. The system is closed, competitive and mutually reinforcing. These structures discourage constructive and collaborative engagement on key issues that are central to the daily lives of the citizenry. Along with religious leaders, political actors play an important role in upholding and reproducing this way of doing politics. In a context of multiple centres of power, the ability to catalyse change is related to collaboration and consensus building across sectarian divides.

It is often assumed that the existence and tradition of cultural plurality in Lebanon as well as the democratic

values instilled in the Lebanese political system, by the nature of the power-sharing system, leads to some degree of inclusivity and equality. In fact, Lebanon was the first Arab state to give women the right to vote. However, by both global and regional comparisons, Lebanon has one of the lowest rates of women’s political representation.

Today, Najib Mikati’s 30-member cabinet includes no women, and women’s political participation since independence has been marginal. The government formed in 2000 was the first to assign female ministers, and this amounted to only two. The 2009 parliamentary elections brought only four women into the 128-member legislature whilst two women were assigned to the 30-member cabinet. Women who have entered this level of politics have often been affiliated to male relatives with a political career, thereby embodying the system of kinship politics. At the local political level, women filled only 139 of 8,200 (1.7 per cent) municipal posts in 1998, 215 of 10,646 (2 per cent) in 2004, and 526 of 11,424 (4.7 per cent) in 2010. For a country that has long boasted its democratic credentials in the Middle East, even with a slight percentage rise since 1998, this paltry track record is surprising compared to others in the region.

Women and justice

Lebanon’s legal system is a potent and pervasive source of inequality. The Constitution purports to guarantee equality before the law regardless of religion or gender. However, Lebanese citizens face different judicial fates depending on their sects or their sex, and for women the principle of equality is regularly breached. Lebanon’s 18 religiously based sects maintain legislative and judicial autonomy over personal status and family laws, and confessional affiliation is defined on a patrilineal basis. This is not optional but part and parcel of being a Lebanese citizen.

Despite ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, the Lebanese state maintains reservations to provisions that ensure women's equality in legislation governing the acquisition of nationality, marriage and family relations (Article 9, Paragraph 2 and Article 16, Paragraphs 1 (c), (d), (f) and (g)). Discrimination against women remains in the National Law, penal code and personal status laws. This legal landscape underpins women's limited participation in the country's political life.

Key areas of personal and family law perpetuate power dynamics to disadvantage women, in areas of marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance. For example, Muslim men may practice polygamy and also marry non-Muslim women, whereas Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims. Sunni and Shia men may easily divorce their wives without due legal process while for a wife it is very hard to file for divorce, even for serious reasons. Sunni and Shia husbands can further revoke divorce and demand a wife's return.

Child custody and guardianship is the legal right of the father, and in the event of the father's death most sects pass custody to male kin. When it comes to inheriting parents' property, Muslim sons are entitled to twice what their sisters are. If a Sunni family has only daughters then the male cousins are entitled to a portion of the inheritance.

The Lebanese penal code also discriminates against women and leaves them unprotected. A wife can be accused of adultery at any time and under any circumstances while a man will only be tried if it occurs in the conjugal home or in the case of an established extramarital relationship. A wife committing adultery is punishable with a sentence from three months to two years, while for the same crime the husband faces only one month to a year. A woman can be forced into sex by her husband without legal consequence. Furthermore, the rape of a virgin by means of deception is potentially subject only to a fine and the law provides impunity to a rapist who marries his victim. Nationality laws transmit citizenship from the father. Women cannot transmit their nationality to their husbands or children, apart from in exceptional cases. But men can transfer Lebanese nationality to their spouse within a year of submitting the relevant paperwork.

The relationship of a Lebanese woman to her context is dependent on and mediated by male relatives with serious implications for her sense of belonging, her autonomy and her security. Since 2009, there has been a strong public demand to place law in conformity with constitutional principles of equality. This has been expressed in a public campaign, *Jinsiyâtî* ('my nationality'), and supported by NGOs such as *Al-Masâwa al-Ân* (Equality Now).

Women's participation as a unifying cause for peacebuilding

In 2010 International Alert, an independent peacebuilding organisation, conducted research into young women's participation in political parties, interviewing representatives from 11 of Lebanon's largest and most influential parties from diverse backgrounds. This research uncovered multiple explanations for women's exclusion: that women lack interest in politics; the patriarchal society's role in casting women in traditional gender roles; the gendered economy and its implications for women's ability to invest time in taking part in public life; and women's role as primary caretakers in the Lebanese family unit. But the research also revealed emerging consensus when it came to the importance of increasing women's representation in politics, and much debate around what increased participation should look like, and how it could be actively pursued.

Suggestions for ways in which participation might be promoted included using the media as a strategic point of intervention and encouraging increased women's education – which may also serve as broader platforms and open up spaces for dialogue and collaboration across sectarian divides. The media was recognised as key in increasing coverage of the socio-economic contributions of women who are already active in politics and elsewhere. The promotion of alternative narratives through the media showing the abilities and potential of women could also contribute to challenging traditional or conservative perceptions. The rise in the level of women's education has had a positive impact on women's political mobilisation and opportunity, and could serve as an entry point through which women can pursue deeper participation.

There is perhaps an abundance of prescriptions to resolve a host of challenges in Lebanon – including those faced by women. However, suggested initiatives fall short without buy-in from diverse stakeholders, both political and religious, and also if the political sphere is not engaged in implementing them. Political will needs to be built, the right knowledge acquired and advocated, and pathways of constructive interaction etched collectively. One way forward is to identify political 'champions' within the centres of power to push for particular issues, and to work with them over time to achieve progress.

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