

Emerging Voices:  
**Young Women in  
Lebanese Politics**

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## Acronyms

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <b>CEDAW</b> | UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women |
| <b>CSOs</b>  | Civil society organisations   |
| <b>LCP</b>   | Lebanese Communist Party  |
| <b>LWC</b>   | Lebanon Women's Council   |
| <b>LWR</b>   | League of Women's Rights  |
| <b>NGOs</b>  | Non-governmental organisations  |
| <b>OCA</b>   | Organization of Communist Action  |
| <b>PSP</b>   | Progressive Socialist Party   |
| <b>RDFL</b>  | Rassemblement Democratique des Femmes Libanaises                              |
| <b>UNDP</b>  | UN Development Programme  |

## Contributors

**Paul Kingston** is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Development Studies at the University of Toronto at Scarborough. His current research focuses on advocacy politics, governance and civil society in the Middle East, and he has recently completed a book manuscript entitled *Reproducing sectarianism: Advocacy networks and the politics of civil society in Postwar Lebanon*. His other recent articles include ‘Donors, patrons, and civil society: Environmental politics in Postwar Lebanon in global perspective’, in O. P. Dwivedi and J. Diez (Eds.). (2008). *Environmental management in a global context: Perspectives from the South*. Broadview Press; and ‘Promoting civil society in the Middle East and at home: NGOs, CIDA and the Middle East Working Group, 1991–2001’, in P. Heinbecker and B. Momani (Eds.). (2007). *Canada and the Middle East: Theory and practice*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. He also co-edited (with Ian Spears) *States within states: Incipient political entities in the Post Cold War Era* (Palgrave Press, 2004), and has published extensively on the history and politics of foreign development assistance in the region, including *Britain and the politics of modernization in the Middle East, 1945–1958* (Cambridge University Press, 1996, 2002), and several articles on the politics of planning and development in Jordan including ‘Rationalizing patrimonialism: Wasfi Tall and economic reform in Jordan, 1962–1967’, in T. Tall (Ed.). (2002). *The persistence of Hashemite Rule: Studies in the politics and the state in Jordan, 1946–1967*. CERMOC: Beirut, pp.115–44.

**Dr Sofia Saadeh** received her BA and MA in History from the American University of Beirut and her PhD in History of the Middle East from Harvard University. Her academic experience spans from being a Fulbright scholar at Harvard to Full Professor at the Lebanese University. She has also taught and lectured at the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese American University and Haganzian University. Dr Saadeh is the author of numerous books and articles, including: *The social structure of Lebanon: Democracy or servitude*; *Antun Saadeh and democracy in Geographic Syria: A nation divided*, ‘Lebanese confessionalism in citizenship and conflict’, as well as *The quest for citizenship in Post Taef Lebanon*.

**Dr Marguerite Helou** is a Professor of Law and Politics at the Lebanese University. She has worked extensively on issues surrounding women’s rights and political participation in Lebanon. Dr Helou has compiled research for numerous international agencies on women’s status in Lebanon and was a guest editor for *Al-Raida*, the Journal of Centre for Studies of Women and Gender in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University, for their recent issue on the women’s quota. Dr Helou’s publications include several book chapters and articles including ‘Lebanese parliamentary elections 1996 and the crisis of democracy’ (1998), ‘The political culture of Lebanese women: An element of change or consecration of tradition’ (2000) and ‘Parliamentary elections in Lebanon 2000: Between repetition and change’ (2002).

**Ms Mirna Abdelnour** was a member of the Municipal Board in Ein Arab and has been engaged in local politics for 12 years. Ms Abdelnour is also an active member of civil society and has worked with both youth and women's committees in her municipality.

**Ms Jane Morrice** entered politics in 1996 when she joined the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. She stood as an independent political candidate in North Down in the 1997 UK general election and was then elected in North Down at the Northern Ireland Assembly election, where she held office from 1998 until 2003. Ms Morrice was appointed Deputy Speaker of the Assembly in February 2000 and remained a prominent member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition until it ended in 2006. Ms Morrice was also involved in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and was a member of the Standing Orders Committee which set the initial rules governing Assembly procedures in post-devolution Northern Ireland.

At 26 years of age, **Ms Stine Renate Håheim** is one of the youngest members of the Norwegian parliament, where she is a member of the Standing Committee on Justice. She has been a member of the executive committee of the youth branch of the Norwegian Labour Party (AUF) since the age of 15, and, at the age of 19, she was elected to the Municipal Government. Currently Ms Håheim is also the member responsible for Middle East policy in the Norwegian Labour Party and an active member in "Women Can Do It", a programme focusing on empowering women in politics in Norway and around the world.

## Introduction

On 5th June 2010 International Alert held a conference on the topic of promoting gender equality in political parties with a focus on the experiences of young women within them. The event developed from Alert's work with the youth wings of Lebanese political parties. During our meetings with leaders and members of the youth departments of Lebanon's major political parties, it was difficult not to notice that almost all of the people we were meeting were young men. And yet research on youth in political parties tells us that since 2005 not only has youth membership in political parties increased, but also the participation of *young women* in particular has increased. If this is so, then where were the young women? From this initial query came further discussions with partisan youth on the issue of gender equality in politics. Was it something they would be interested in working on further? Is gender equality an issue of debate between political parties? Across the political spectrum, youth agreed that gender equality is a pressing issue of concern and one that they would be interested in discussing and debating with other parties. Thus, the concept for this conference emerged.

Through Alert's consultations with the youth departments, we established the following goals for the event:

1. Strengthen understanding and gain new insights on the challenges and opportunities related to women's political engagement by listening to international and Lebanese experiences and exchanging lessons learned among Lebanese political parties.
2. Articulate future visions for the status of women in Lebanese politics.
3. Identify and discuss the range of changes needed and the responsibilities of different actors in implementing these changes.
4. Share new thinking and concrete proposals as to how young political party members can promote women's engagement and advancement in politics.

The conference included international and Lebanese speakers, as well as a preliminary period of research on young women in political parties conducted by Alert. The event demonstrated the desire, energy and resources of young people in youth wings of parties to promote the role of women in Lebanese politics, so much so that the conference has since led to the development of new work by Alert that aims to engage youth wings in order to tackle issues of gender inequality in Lebanon.

### The context: Gender in Lebanon – Women in politics

Although Lebanon is known in the Middle East for its relative political openness and for the degree of freedom Lebanese women enjoy, it paradoxically has one of the lowest rates of women's political engagement in the region. Furthermore, Lebanon has implemented very few gender reforms. In fact, fewer reforms for gender equality have been implemented in Lebanon than in Middle Eastern countries with more conservative and restrictive regimes, such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Yemen.

Lebanese women do play a significant role in civil society, advocacy and social services, and increasingly also in business and the private sector. When it comes to their entry into the formal political arena, however, women's numbers remain extremely low. Although there have been some notable exceptions in the post-civil war era (the appointment of the female Minister of Finance by Prime Minister Saad Hariri in 2010 is one recent and often cited example), the gains women make in politics are infrequent,



temporary and often a result of personal and/or familial connections as opposed to more widespread, systemic gender-related change. This, of course, is not particular to women, as the majority of individuals who enter politics do so through these types of informal channels.

As the contributions in this report discuss, women's ability to advance within political parties is also limited. Women in Lebanese political parties have historically been relegated, and indeed marginalised, to the realm of "women's committees". Women have often been denied a voice in the mainstream party machineries, and decision-making positions and gender-equality goals have often been sacrificed for the sake of political or sectarian gains. Women in Lebanese parties have historically been mobilised by male leadership for the purposes of demonstrations, elections, social service work and events organisation but have rarely been well represented in leadership and/or decision-making positions. While there are some exceptions, this picture of Lebanese women in the political realm remains true today.

## What are the reasons behind persistent gender inequality in Lebanon? And what are the links between gender inequality and conflict?

The contributions of the diverse speakers at the conference analysed the issue of gender inequality and the nature of the Lebanese conflict from a variety of perspectives.

Paul Kingston's contribution provided a framework of two important structural aspects of Lebanon's political order, namely that it is gendered and path dependent. The impact of these aspects, as Kingston explained, is a system that perpetuates a male-dominated, clan-based system of clientelism. Not only does this discriminate against and disadvantage women, but it also creates a sense of citizenship based in one's communal identity where people are granted privileges in return for loyalty as opposed to equality and rights. Kingston concluded with a brief discussion of "ways forward" to promote change. Although Kingston ultimately argued that structural change is the only way to promote lasting change in Lebanon, he also suggested possibilities for working within the current realities of the Lebanese system to promote women's greater political participation and specifically addressed the role political parties could play.

Sofia Saadeh argued that there is an inextricable connection between women's discrimination and the sectarianism system, and she specifically discussed Lebanon's system of personal status laws. Saadeh argued that the abolishment of the sectarian system is the only answer to promoting gender equality in the long term.

Marguerite Helou discussed the complexities of Lebanon's socio-cultural characteristics and particularly the difficulties of the consociational system of power-sharing. She argued that the system has bred a lack of trust and patriarchal relations that persist in both society and the political realm. This context, Helou argued, leads to gender inequality in Lebanon. Although there has been some progress in recent years, political parties are still dominated by patriarchal relations and ways of working. Helou advocated focusing on internal reforms, both within parties and in the country more generally. She urged Lebanese citizens and parties not to blame others – either other groups within Lebanon or foreign powers – for the problems that plague the country.

The personal experience of Mirna Abdelnour, a Lebanese municipal politician, as well as Alert's research demonstrated that there is a desire among young women to see political parties take more active roles in promoting women in politics. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the history of women in their parties, as well as the status of women in political parties today, for which actual numbers and positions are difficult to obtain.

The dialogue between the conference participants demonstrated the common desire and also the lack of information, or the misinformation, that exists on the subject. More crucially, the dialogue between the political party youth showed that, despite the common desire for more gender equality, there is much debate on how to achieve it. Through quota systems? By abolishing sectarianism? Through reform of personal status laws? By introducing a civil code? As with many of the issues facing Lebanese society more widely, there is little consensus on how to move forward.

## What can we learn from international perspectives?

This conference brought two international speakers to Lebanon to share their experiences with Lebanese youth. From Northern Ireland, we heard from Jane Morrice, the previous deputy speaker of the NI Assembly, who discussed her experience of engaging in politics through a coalition of women from different sectarian backgrounds in a deeply divided society. The Women's Coalition, as Morrice described, was not a party free or independent of sectarian affiliations, but rather one that sought to reconcile sectarian interests and beliefs with peaceful coexistence. Her story of women from both sides of the conflict coming together for the common purpose of addressing critical issues they felt were constantly sidelined by "more pressing" issues of conflict is a story Lebanese women know all too well. The phrase "it's not the time to address women's rights" is a constant refrain, as one of the young women at the conference noted in the discussion. What is the likelihood, however, that such a coalition could form in Lebanon? Participants seemed to find this possibility doubtful.

At the age of 27, Norwegian MP Stine Håheim is one of the youngest MPs in her country's history. Håheim impressed on us that, despite Norway's history of democracy, it is still a struggle to address women's rights and positions in politics. She recalled how surprised she was when she entered politics to find that, even in Norway, she faced resistance and discrimination from other politicians because of her gender and her age. She described the "ridicule techniques" that can be used to make women feel insecure, or even inadequate. Håheim concluded by urging Lebanese youth to "stay impatient" and not to give up in their efforts to promote the type of change they want to see in their country.

The conference marked the beginning of a new dialogue between diverse partisan youth on issues of women and gender in politics. It demonstrated the tremendous energy and resources that exist within political parties in the form of their young members, and the desire that many of these members have to promote gender equality in the Lebanese political scene. It also demonstrated the interest youth have in hearing the perspectives and experiences of people from other countries who have tackled the same sorts of issues – both from young politicians and from women in other divided societies. The challenge, as these youth identified, is to learn from both the international and Lebanese perspectives, and to use the knowledge to fuel new ideas and approaches to address gender inequalities in Lebanon. This work does not need to wait for consensus between political parties to move forward – although this is an important goal for which to strive – it can happen with steps *within* the political parties themselves, as conference participants identified.

# **PART ONE: Lebanese Women and Politics: Examining the Barriers to Greater Gender Equality**

# Women and Political Parties in Lebanon: Reflections on the Historical Experience

Dr Paul Kingston

This brief is designed to raise some issues with respect to the historical experience of women's participation within political parties in Lebanon. It should be emphasised, however, that the secondary literature on this issue is virtually non-existent. Hence, these reflections are based mostly upon theoretically informed anecdotal information culled from interviews and some primary sources.

## A Brief History of Women's Involvement in Political Parties

Lebanese women's participation within parties has taken three broad forms. First, there is the provision of traditional forms of support for political parties, logistical support for campaigns, active involvement in the social services arm of political parties, etc. As the scholar Yolla Polity Sharara remarked, 'Everything was just as in the family. For women, the service jobs; for men, the noble jobs'.<sup>1</sup> Second, women began to establish and become involved in women's committees within political parties. Finally, women have begun to integrate themselves into the executive decision-making apparatus of the party.

However, women's involvement in all of these activities has been limited. Historically, as Elizabeth Thompson reveals, of the three political parties that emerged in Lebanon during the French Mandate period of the mid- to late 1930s, both the *Najjada* and the Phalanges restricted membership to men, and the Syrian Nationalist Party of Antun Sa'ada, despite encouraging women to join, actually only had a few women members.<sup>2</sup>

During the post-independence/pre-civil war era the involvement of women began to increase. This was due to a number of general factors that encouraged women to engage more in public life. These factors included:

- 1) the emergence of women's activism among some women's associations, symbolised most notably by the attainment of women's suffrage in 1953;
- 2) an increased number of women entering the workforce, including in the liberal professions, linked to the growing size and prominence of the educated middle classes in the country;
- 3) growing connections between women's movements in the West and Lebanese women living in the diaspora. The emergence of a more robust voice for women within the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), for example, is attributed to the return to Lebanon from France of Janine Rubeiz who joined the PSP as one of the first women members; she went on to become an influential feminist voice within the party, a strong advocate for women's rights, and eventually the head of the party's Foreign Affairs Department; and
- 4) the growing presence of the PLO in Lebanon after 1970 that energised oppositional politics in the country also had an energising effect on women's activism within political parties, and led to the emergence of more explicitly women-focused activities. It was further revealed in interviews that a significant degree of support for women within leftist political parties in Lebanon emanated from the USSR, which offered trips to the USSR for seminars and training programmes that were targeted at women.

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1 Y. P. Sharara (1978). 'Women and politics in Lebanon', *Khamsin* 6. Pluto Press. p.14.

2 E. Thompson (2000). *Colonial citizens: Republican rights, paternal privilege, and gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Colombia University Press. p.195.

These factors resulted not so much in significantly increased membership of women within political parties (indeed, these numbers remained extremely low), but rather in greater activism among the women that were involved. This activism was symbolised by the creation in the early 1970s of women's committees within the party structures, such as the Women's Department within the PSP that was created in 1974. Women's committees had a number of objectives, including the promotion of women's membership in the parties, advocating within the party for women's voices to have greater influence and placing issues of women's equality on the party's political agenda.

Accounts of women involved in these committees, however, reveal an enormous degree of frustration with the limited degree of influence that they, as women, were able to achieve. For instance, women's committees, rather than giving a voice to women within the party, tended to marginalise them from the central decision-making processes. Sharara was also very critical of the women's committees within the various political parties themselves, arguing that they also found it difficult to transcend their various broader political loyalties and come together collectively as women. Sharara describes them as being 'unwilling to divulge their dirty linen across party lines'.<sup>3</sup> As a result, many women within these party structures began to seek greater autonomy, if not independence, from male-dominated party structures. This came in three forms:

- 1) Autonomous women's associations within parties. Women within the PSP in 1976, for example, formed such an association, which later led to the emergence of the "Union des Femmes Progressistes".
- 2) Autonomous women's associations outside of the party structures. A number of the leading women's activists in Lebanon at the time, many of whom are still prominent today, were involved in forming such associations. Wadad Chaktura, for example, left the Organization of Communist Action (OCA) to form the Rassemblement Democratique des Femmes Libanaises (RDFL) in 1976, and Linda Mattar continued her involvement in the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) while becoming active in the League of Women's Rights (LWR). Both the RDFL and the LWR are still among the prominent women's advocacy organisations today.
- 3) Active networking among women activists and women's associations outside of the party framework coupled with attempts to establish and work through more explicitly women's groups, such as the Lebanon Women's Council (LWC) and the National Council for Lebanese Women affiliated with the Prime Minister's Office. This is probably the most prevalent trend in the post-war period.

In short, political parties have not been hospitable institutions for women in Lebanon. Not only have the numbers of women involved in politics historically been extremely low, but women have also been excluded from positions of influence within the decision-making apparatus, and goals of promoting women's equality have been systematically subordinated to broader political, if not sectarian, goals rather than being prioritised by the government and leaders in power.

## Women in Political Parties in Lebanon – Problems, Obstacles and Recommendations

In what way has the Lebanese context contributed to continued gender inequality in political parties? Two structural contexts will be discussed here: first, the gendered/patriarchal/paternalistic nature of Lebanon's political order and, second, Lebanon's political order as "path dependent".

### The gendered/patriarchal/paternalistic nature of Lebanon's political order

Patriarchy is defined as 'the privileging of males and seniors and the legitimating of those privileges in the morality and idiom of kinship'.<sup>4</sup> Of course, patriarchy is not a static concept, rather, it changes

<sup>3</sup> Y. P. Sharara (1978). *Op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> S. Joseph (1994). 'Problematizing gender and relational rights: Experience from Lebanon', *Social Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp.271–85.

over time and space/context. It does not manifest itself in the same way in all places. It is for this reason that many prefer to use alternative words to describe systems of gender inequality – Elizabeth Thompson chooses to use the word “paternalism” in its place.

The forces supporting the Lebanese brand of patriarchy/paternalism are extremely resilient and stem from several factors. First, the Lebanese state’s abrogation of jurisdiction over all matters concerned with personal status law, which have been delegated to the religious court system. The roots of this system can be linked to the Ottoman *millet* system. However, its institutionalisation within the modern Lebanese state stems back to the French Mandate period and the formulation of the Lebanese constitution of 1926. Instead, the Lebanese constitution and subsequent parliamentary decisions have dictated that all communities must establish their own personal status court systems autonomous from the state; there are 15 among the 18 legally recognised religious communities in Lebanon at present. None of these court systems is subject to the authority of the more universal dictates of Lebanese law – including its provisions for the protection of the rights of individuals. Nor are they subject to the authority of international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – although they have been doubly safeguarded by the decision of the Lebanese government to express its reservations with respect to aspects of the convention that infringe upon the personal status authority of the religious court system. In effect, Lebanon has 15 different personal status (and male-dominated) court systems that are accountable only to themselves.

Not surprisingly, all court systems base their legal decisions on the dictate that the male is the head of the household. From this flows the patriarchal rulings that characterise personal status court rulings in all of the religious court systems – be it with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, domestic violence or questions of alimony.

### Lebanon’s political order as “path dependent”

There have been consistent demands from activists and lawyers to create a civil personal status code – either optional or universal. The latest demands emerged during the 1990s in the form of a parliamentary resolution supported by a campaign of civil society activists. Further backing up these demands have been two structural transformations in Lebanese society including: (i) the growth of an educated middle class; and (ii) the growing presence of women within Lebanon’s public sphere. However, neither these changing socio-structures nor the campaigns have had much influence or success. Indeed, they have always been confronted by the mobilisation of powerful counter-movements in support of the status quo. The result has been the persistence of an institutional structure in spite of the social transformations that have taken place within Lebanese society – a situation that suggests that Lebanon’s political order is “path dependent”. Indeed, it is clear that Lebanon’s personal status legal system is now lagging behind more reform-oriented systems in other parts of the region, particularly in North Africa.

“Path-dependent” political orders are reinforced on a continual basis by “mechanisms of reproduction”. In Lebanon, these mechanisms run to the very heart of its consociational political system. Four such mechanisms in Lebanon are:

- 1) *Religious officials*. Religious officials have access to the highest constitution court of the land and have the right of appeal if parliamentary laws violate their autonomy. Citizens do not have this right. In effect, they have veto power over reform to the personal status legal system as it stands.
- 2) *The electoral system*. Lebanon’s electoral system transforms elites into mechanisms of reproduction of the existing order for two main reasons. First, their locally based nature has facilitated the continuation of male- and clan-dominated patron–clientelist relations; and, second, the system of proportional religious representation links these patron–clientelist networks to the broader institutional framework of Lebanon’s confessional system – a framework which deputies have been reluctant to challenge.

- 3) *Citizens*. As a result of both the informal power of patron–clientelism in the country and the formal stipulation that they must vote as members of a religious community rather than as citizens of Lebanon as a whole, Lebanese citizens also participate and help to reproduce the existing institutional political order.
- 4) Finally, the Lebanese political order excludes direct political representation based upon a civic identity, all citizens having to vote based upon their religious identity. This has made it virtually impossible for non-confessional movements and political parties to gain representation let alone power within the Lebanese parliament. Indeed, until 1970, leftist and secular-based political parties were illegal.

## Conclusion: The Way Forward?

Given the path-dependent nature of Lebanon’s political system, working for change within the existing institutional structure is likely to be more effective than other approaches. Interestingly, while the Lebanese system is rigid in its overall parameters, it is also flexible in its day-to-day activities. This suggests that there is room for manoeuvre for those interested in promoting both the greater involvement of women in political life and, ultimately, efforts towards reforming the day-to-day workings, if not the institutional pillars, of Lebanon’s patriarchal system. Of course, Lebanese women are negotiating within these spaces as individuals all the time. This is a phenomenon that Suad Joseph has described as Lebanon’s system of “relational rights”. However, women also need institutional assistance in these “relational” negotiations. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can provide some assistance, although their presence within the country is uneven. Political parties, on the other hand, with their more national presence are in a better position, if accompanied by political will, to provide this across-the-board institutional support.

Political parties are, of course, deeply embedded within the country’s political system, and yet there are ways in which they can contribute to the effort to promote gender equality in the country. For example, political parties could make a concerted effort to recruit women to join them. This will only be successful if women are integrated on an equal basis to their male colleagues. To do this, parties would have to make a concerted effort to promote gender equality, including at the executive level of decision-making. The creation of, and marginalisation of women within, “women’s committees” alone historically has not been an effective way of encouraging women’s broader participation within the political process.

Parties could also establish explicit policy platforms designed to promote the rights of women *within* the existing institutional parameters of Lebanon. This could include promoting greater awareness, if not piecemeal reforms, to the personal status court system. This could also include demanding the greater public accountability of religious court systems through the publication of court proceedings, the promotion of awareness-raising training among women about how the religious court systems operate and what their rights are within it, as well as seeking targeted reforms in the existing personal status court system – one of which should revolve around the provision of financial assistance to women interested in accessing the often expensive court proceedings. Political parties could also work to establish dialogue between the various political movements around ways of promoting justice with respect to gender issues.

In closing, even though political parties are entrenched in the system which has been shown to be part of the problem, precisely because of this position, they have the potential to be more effective than advocacy NGOs at effecting changes and reforms that could promote gender equality in Lebanon.

# Women in Lebanese Politics: Underlying Causes of Women's Lack of Representation in Lebanese Politics

Dr Sofia Saadeh

Europe has a long history of democracy. The situation in Lebanon is quite a bit more difficult. Many Lebanese believe that other countries in the Arab region are sub-standard, yet we see that there is more women's participation in those other countries than in Lebanon. There were female ministers in Jordan, for example, long before Lebanon.

## Political Sectarianism

The Lebanese system is not a democratic one; it is a consociational one. Our system allows for the domination of religion and religious courts over many affairs, including personal status laws. Personal status laws deny women equal status. The Lebanese constitution is modelled after the French system, which pronounces equality between citizens. In the Lebanese system, however, governmental power is divided by the religious sects according to the size of their population. The figures are outdated, though, as a proper census has not been carried out in Lebanon since 1943. The constitution stated in Article 95 that the system of political sectarianism was to be temporary, but it has become a permanent system as of 1989, when the Taif Agreement reaffirmed citizen representation on the basis of religious sect. Furthermore, the constitutional council, created in the post-civil-war era as a government monitoring mechanism, is not allowed to infringe on religious affairs, so religious leaders basically have the power to tell the government to stay out of their affairs. I cannot, therefore, call myself a citizen unless I call myself a Christian or Muslim. There is no Lebanese citizen in the civic sense.

## Personal Status Laws and the Domination of Religion

As we know, personal status laws are religious laws that are imposed by religious courts. All such laws are based in a patriarchal system, which is institutionalised patriarchy. The laws cannot be changed because they are religious, and religious communities are granted freedom over their own affairs. There are no examples of a woman gaining rights from religious institutions. Women's rights have only been gained through secular parts of the state. Many aspects of religious laws contribute to oppression of Lebanese women. In addition, the laws of Lebanon are extra-territorial, which means that a religious community may use laws from other countries within their own courts and community, and the government has no jurisdiction to prevent it. Thus, Lebanese women are divided by their religious sects. How can the state interfere to advance women's rights when the constitution forbids it from doing so? Both Christians and Muslims have refused the implementation of civil law. Yet, this is exactly what is needed – women's acceptance of equal rights. Women will not be able to achieve equal power in a sectarian system because religious laws will always discriminate and be against them.

## Female Involvement in Political Institutions

Even in other types of sectors, women in leadership positions are few and far between. There are 40,000 women teachers and 13,000 male teachers, for example, yet extremely few female principals. Likewise, there are more female than male students and graduates at most Lebanese universities today, yet we see little, if any, upward mobility for women in leadership and decision-making positions. Media have daily interviews with politicians, but female politicians are rarely interviewed, and, when they are, they are often asked about their private and family lives. In



political parties today, women's numbers are low. Male party members do not treat women as equals in the political parties, and women are often relegated to administrative positions.

In the cases of many western liberal democracies, democracy came first, followed by women's movements for suffrage. In Lebanon, where the state is so weak, instead we have a mixture of divided sectarian communities that each discriminate against women, and it is difficult to see how women will be able to come together and demand full rights. Women's advancement is thus inextricably tied to demolition of sectarianism. Past attempts to achieve women's full rights have failed because the sectarian system is strong. To achieve change, we must establish new rules for the players, such as political parties, within the political system. This should include introducing a quota system that would grant women a minimum level of representation.

## Lebanese Women and Political Parties: History, Issues and Options for Reform

Dr Marguerite Helou

Before I start, I would like to express my joy to find young men around us. It has been 16 years I have been doing this, and I find it is almost always all women who are present. When men do attend these types of events, they often do not contribute, so welcome to all of you.

I'm going to be talking about women and political parties. This requires a lot of statistics and time, but since we are limited I will focus on the following. First, I will discuss the political and cultural framework. This framework impacts the structure of Lebanese parties and their priorities. Second, I will give a review of women's history in political parties. I won't give figures, but rather some conclusions and lessons learned.

### The Socio-cultural Framework: Lebanon's Confessional System

Allow me to be courageous and suggest that the sectarian system is an alibi for us to not look too hard for solutions. It is a power-sharing formula, and we often hear that, although everyone wants power to be shared, no one particularly wants sectarianism. When we speak of society and politics, it seems we have different objectives. We talk about diversity in Lebanon, and usually, when we do so, we are implicitly talking about the conflict between our multiple and heterogeneous communities. Not every diverse society suffers from conflict, however. In Lebanon, though, we lack consensus on fundamental issues and have for some time. This is connected to the issue of our laws, and relegating politics along the lines of identity.

Another problem is that we lack confidence in each other – trust and confidence in the mutual stakeholders of this country and system is absent. Thus, minor details and issues become politically heightened and charged, and this is especially true for women's politics. The problems with our power-sharing system are mirrored in the makeup, behaviour and ideas of the political parties. They are a part of sectarian politics.

Political parties also mirror social characteristics present in Lebanon. For example, most parties have a central, patriarchal figure, who is the leader of the party. This “father figure”, along with the familial-type loyalty that exists within parties, is part of Lebanon's patriarchal social system, and it is this system that political parties exist within, embody and, thus, reproduce. Of course, the social system privileges males, especially older males, and discriminates against women and youth.

### A Review of Women's History in Political Parties

I will briefly review some historical highlights that are relevant to Lebanese political parties. During the French Mandate period, there were two main political parties, and, within them, all the power was held by men. There was a third party for women, but it did not flourish. If they worked at all, women were still thought to be best in service jobs. During independence, many more political parties emerged. We now have 59 political parties in Lebanon, and these are just the listed ones. Women's enthusiasm for political participation grew in the 1950s because the Soviet Union encouraged women's participation and there were several leftist parties in Lebanon. The Palestinian movement also played a key role in encouraging female participation, and there started to be an increase in female education. During the civil war, women entered militias and participated in conflict. Unlike women in the West after the Second World War, however, Lebanese

women did not continue to make gains as a result of increased empowerment linked to their wartime efforts. In fact, after the civil war, women withdrew from political parties, either because of their own disgust or because they were pressured to do so by men who wanted to retain the positions for themselves. Men did not recognise the wartime achievements of women. In the 1990s, we found that youth began to join parties. The same goes for women as well. However, it is difficult to get a sense of exactly how many women are members of political parties because parties claim they do not count members on a gendered basis (they actually say this is a type of discrimination!).

I would say that there has been some progress for women in political parties. Specifically, there are more visible women in higher roles; however, there are still few of them and the overall numbers of women in political parties have not increased. To push for greater change, there would have to be a stronger movement of women, and Lebanese women have not been able to establish this type of sisterhood. This is the case not only in political parties but also in civil society and civil society organisations (CSOs), where women do not always work together. We find that women enter political parties when they are younger, then, once they start to have children, they leave. This reflects how women view their roles. There are some Islamic parties that still do not allow female members.

So how can we trigger a change? In Lebanon, we are constantly blaming others, but placing such blame is a form of victimisation and it does not move us forward. The issue of gender equality is an issue and a responsibility for all: men women, young, old, etc. We need deeper and more substantial self-criticism within the political parties on this issue. Political parties should ask why they are not attracting women elites. Why is that? What is the barrier here?

Parties should also promote internal quotas. What is needed is greater political will within the political parties and among the politicians. We know that this is not only the responsibility of women, and we know that men must advocate as well.

## Experiences in Running in Municipal Elections

**Ms Mirna Abdelnour**

Today I will discuss my experience on the Municipal Board and the challenges we have faced. It was always my dream, as a motivated woman, to participate in political work. This dream came true when I participated in the elections. I was young, enthusiastic, but afraid of the people's opinion of me, a young female, running in municipal elections in Ein Arab. I ran, won and became the youngest person on the Municipal Board. I worked very hard both to fulfil my dream and to help my village, especially the financial and psychological needs of the women in our village. I was a very active member for all of the 12 years I was involved. I did administrative work, trainings and many activities that I organised in coordination with other organisations. Involvement on the Municipal Board opened many doors for me. I participated in organisations that broadened my political life, especially with respect to women's rights. I also became engaged in environmental issues and pursued a range of environmental-touristic projects that enabled young people from Lebanon to visit and learn about small villages and the issues facing them. I have been encouraged by the success of these projects and activities. But I can still see how the conservative nature of Lebanese society continues to suppress women, despite the good work women do.

Political parties can play an important role in achieving results if they work together and allow people to connect with and to trust each other, rather than trusting just the head of the party. Most people become attached and loyal to the head rather than their ideas. We need to change this, and teamwork can be an important help in this regard.

Recently I have become involved with a movement called The Arab Struggle Movement. The aims of this movement are to help women to get involved in political work and to participate with men in the decision-making process. Women should have a bigger role, one that extends beyond the home. Today, even after 12 years, I still face problems at the Municipal Board, especially when it comes to decision-making. Women are not seen as decision-makers. I was the sole female on the board. My projects were often not approved, and then later on I would see that men from the board would have taken the idea I had proposed and implemented it themselves. Still, there are men who are interested in change, and I respect them.

In the end, though, there will still be men who want to retain power and make decisions. Thus, I think women need more training and help to strengthen their efforts and work. We need to build capacities of people, especially young people and women. Parties and associations have to promote the capacities of these young people in order to help them fight for women's rights as well. As women, we need psychological and financial support. I did not run in the recent elections. All of us members of the board decided to vacate our seats to allow for a new group of people to run. Sadly, there were no women who ran in our village. Now that I am not on the Municipal Board, I will continue to help in other ways. I want to keep fighting for women's rights.

It is hard to believe that there are still those who think that women should not have a role in the public sphere in the 21st century. We all have to believe in women to give them this role in Lebanese society. I ask all of those interested in political work to give a greater role to women. I would like to ask all those involved in political parties to give women a greater role. And for the women who seek to become more involved in politics: in the beginning you will face problems, but keep struggling to express yourselves. Our motivation is to show what we are capable of. Have no fears of the problems you may face. I did a lot of things that the men could not or would not do; that's why I kept working. Let's be aware of these things and this is how we will make a change.

## Part Two: International Perspectives on Women in Politics

## From Belfast to Beirut: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Conflict and the Women's Coalition

Ms Jane Morrice

*'I was 16 when "the Troubles" started. My son was 16 when they ended.'* – Jane Morrice

When thinking about how to approach this, I didn't know where to start. I was in awe. I've heard a lot about Lebanon but I never dared to visit. That's slightly unusual for me, coming from Belfast. Beirut is supposed to be a frightening place, and it is, until you visit. Now that I am here I have a very different impression. Does Belfast look as bad from Beirut? If so, it goes to show you that we have a lot in common.

My story is simple: born in Belfast, I was 16 when "the Troubles" started. There were bomb scares, riots, soldiers and murders for 30 years. I'm sure I don't need to describe that in detail – you and your parents know about that. It's strange to come from far away and have so much in common. When I was young, I wanted to get out of Belfast. I hated the hatred because I too was starting to hate. I took off as a journalist in Brussels. After a while, I went home working for the BBC, right in the middle of what was happening in Ireland. It was strange reporting on your own country's troubles. I knew someday that I would have to put the microphone down and do something about the situation. It took me ten years. I was in my early forties, with a son, and there was a fragile ceasefire in place. I gathered the courage to think that I could make a difference. I was never a member of a political party, rarely voted; I was what you would call "politically hopeless". I didn't like the traditional parties. I wanted something new and different. So, I, along with a group of women activists, decided to have a go at "do it yourself politics". In 1996 Ireland's Secretary of State called an election to get representatives to the peace talks that were to be starting in Northern Ireland. They needed paramilitary loyalists to get representation. In order to give a say to some smaller parties, the Secretary of State devised a system: the top ten would get seats at the peace negotiation table. That gave us an opportunity. Our group wrote to each main political party and asked, 'How will women be represented in your party at the talks?' We got one response. It wasn't enough. So, we formed the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Seventy women and I became vote gatherers. We had six weeks to become one of the top ten political parties! And we became ninth!

Two years later was the Good Friday Agreement. (I noticed that the translators earlier referred to it as "Great Friday". I love that.) It was an amazing experience. Very few people took us seriously. A women's party ... unheard of! When I told my husband, his response was: 'What would you do if I set up a men's party?' I said, 'If everyone in politics were women, I would help you set up a men's party.'

We needed women in there. We were a young group. We were very diverse, and even included some men. I don't think we would have got elected without some men. We wanted two things: women in politics and peace. The two were intertwined. It wasn't easy. We came from different backgrounds. We were like a microcosm of Northern Ireland and people taking different stances on the issues of abortion, decommissioning of weapons and prisoner release. We had to move into a space where we could listen and learn from each other. We never left our own identities behind. We carried them with us, but we were forced to understand each other's positions and backgrounds. It was tough, but we had to get there. We were all-aligned, rather than non-aligned. We had three core principles: equality, inclusion and human rights. Everyone had to be agreed to those and the decisions must jive with them. So we went to the peace tables. The nice thing was that we were presenting as a group. We had worked it out before coming to the table. We got to the assembly and made good changes. I have no magic recipe: time, trust, etc.

There are still walls in Northern Ireland. Only true government is a mirror image of that which it governs. In conclusion, it is in everyone's interest to encourage more women in politics. I did it and I have to say that it was the most challenging and rewarding work I've done – except being a mother, yet it's almost the same job. How can you keep your home safe without keeping your streets safe? And here's something special: I was 16 when “the Troubles” started. My son was 16 when they ended. That's what politics is all about. I rest my case.

## Equal on Paper, Not in Practice: My Experience as a Young Female Politician in Norway

Ms Stine Renate Håheim

*'I believed I had the same opportunities as my brother ... that was before I got into politics!' – Stine Håheim*

I am 26 years old and am a member of the Labour Party in the Norwegian parliament. I am going to talk about young women in politics and rights in Norway. These are my own experiences. You might not agree with me. We are very different countries. We are coming from different points. Still, we are young and engaged in politics, and we have that in common. I hope I can bring a new perspective that will create some debate.

The UN Agenda lists Norway at the top for women's political rights. Women are well represented and more women go on to higher education than men. I took equality for granted. I thought we were really equal. Then I joined politics and it opened my eyes. At 19 years old, I ran for a municipality seat. I was given a seat in the political leadership because of a lack of women – we have a quota. I remember having mixed feelings. I didn't want that seat just because I was a woman.

The men made sure to tell me it was the only reason I got the leadership seat. I didn't want it for that reason. It was a tough few months. In the beginning they tried to ignore me, but they couldn't ignore me forever. Then they said my ideas were impossible, they thought I was stupid. Things were done the same way all the time. Then, I managed to convince them on an important environmental issue. It took time, guts and tears. I believe I share this experience with a lot of women in Norway. Many leave after one term. It was easier for me. We were equal on paper, but not in practice. Men in leading positions have recruited men for hundreds of years. Women are victims of a glass ceiling, and it's hard to get power.

From that day on, I've become a feminist. I'm for quotas now. Why is it important to have women? I believe Jane made it clear. As a social democrat, though, I believe that everyone should be equal. A democracy without perfect female equality is not a democracy. There are differences between men and women. We are raised in different ways and have different expectations, so we have different things to bring to the table. What is my advice? We have worked with a quota system in the Labour Party, and it has worked. In the 1970s women formed their own cross-party organisations, demanded to be heard and convinced men with loud voices. They basically said that you cannot win elections without us! We need to fight barriers. We need to fight against ridicule techniques, where men use different techniques to make women feel uncomfortable in politics. These include interrupting, ignoring, asking why we aren't home taking care of the children, etc. We fight this kind of thing in seminars. Now, we know that ridicule is simply a defence mechanism. It's important to remember that political information sessions are often informal: networking is a man's domain, while women have to get home and take care of the family. It is crucial for women to have a network too where they can strategise. We have our own meetings before assembly, which gives women more confidence. We also need to change perspectives. For instance, journalists always ask how we will manage to take care of our children. It is never asked of a man. Is politics just for men? It can be a tough game, men speak louder and longer, repeat, steal other's points. Men speak first at meetings and have power to set the agenda. I was terrified of speaking at first, but the female president of the organisation encouraged me. She was a rallying person. 'It's your responsibility', she told me. She would not give up until talking time was 50–50.

The Labour Party is the only party in Norway with a 50–50 quota. I believe we are one of the few parties like this in the world. It has enabled women to have high positions in government. There are detractors of the system. But what does it mean to be a good politician? It is like a football team, you need people who are good at different things. There are parties in Norway that don't have quotas, and they are male dominated.

Finally, a message to my sisters: we need solidarity. No matter where you're from, we need solidarity.



# Part Three: Perspectives of Lebanese Political Party Youth on Issues Surrounding Women in Politics

## Perspectives of Young Women in Political Parties on Women and Politics in Lebanon

Ms Victoria Louise Stamadianou

As part of a conference held in June 2010 on the subject of young women in Lebanon's political parties, International Alert conducted research into how young women's participation in the country's political parties is perceived, which factors govern it and how it could be increased. The research focused on exploring the reflections of the young women members of political parties with respect to their role and trajectory in their parties as well as their individual experiences. The interviewees represented 11 of Lebanon's largest and most influential political parties and came from diverse backgrounds. This report outlines the main themes and issues that arose in these interviews.

### Factors Promoting Young Women's Political Participation

The interviewees were asked to reflect and elaborate on the conditions that they thought trigger and facilitate Lebanese women's interest and involvement in politics. Almost all interviewees pointed towards Lebanon's political life as a key inciting factor. In the words of one interviewee: 'when you live somewhere where your daily discussions are not only about the price of milk but also about if there will be war this month, it is difficult not to be interested [in politics]'. In most cases, they cited personal experiences of armed conflict and its impacts and/or specific political events in the country's recent past as conditions that awoke their political consciousness, led to the formation of their political views and positions, and increased their interest in becoming politically active.

Several interviewees also viewed Lebanon as a country in which, compared to other countries in the region, women enjoy more freedoms. They explained this as being a result of the existence and tradition of cultural plurality in Lebanon as well as the democratic values instilled in the Lebanese political system, which, by the nature of its system of power-sharing, leads to some degree of inclusivity and equality. They linked these conditions with the creation of increased space for women to take part in the public sphere. Many of the young women also went on to point out that this tolerance is not as widespread outside of Beirut. It is important to note here that the link that young women outlined between the existence of a liberal culture and its role in facilitating women's political representation should not be overemphasised. Despite Lebanon's perceived progressive position compared to other nations in the Arab region, it has one of the lowest indicators of women's participation in political life. By both global and regional comparisons, Lebanon has one of the lowest rates of women's political representation at the national level. In the May 2009 parliamentary elections, the number of seats held by women dropped from six to four, with women constituting just over 3 percent of the representatives in Lebanon's new parliament.

A number of interviewees highlighted the role of the family in enabling their political mobilisation. The interviewees who brought this factor to the forefront cited their parents' education and/or professional careers as conditions that laid the foundations for their engagement with political life. These links were described in a variety of ways. One interviewee suggested that her parents' high level of education and their advanced careers meant that the relationship among them was more equal. In turn, this resulted in the interviewee's capacity to confront conventional views about the role of women. A few others suggested that this translated into the equal treatment of male and female children and more flexibility regarding the interests and aspirations of their daughters if they sought to engage in the public sphere. Others suggested that they inherited a high level of educational capital from their parents and that this, in turn, was linked with their ability to advance their careers and to reject conventional pathways for women.

It is worth noting that 13 out of the 18 interviewees had family members who were, or who had been, politically engaged either as journalists, activists, professionals in CSOs, etc., or more specifically as members of political parties. In fact, 11 interviewees had family members who were concurrently, or who had previously been, involved in some capacity with the political party with which they were affiliated. Many interviewees did not cite this as a reason for their political interest, mobilisation or affiliation. For example, one interviewee mentioned her uncle being a member of the political party with which she was affiliated but made no link between the two. Another interviewee rejected the idea that the involvement of her parents in the party that she was involved with had influenced her decision: 'Both my parents are part of this party but I entered of my own accord.' In other cases, the young women focused on the role of the family structure as having provided a personal example and familiarity with the political avenue. In some cases, this was put forward as the reason for political mobilisation, as was the case for one interviewee, who explained that members of her family held political positions and stated that, 'if my family were not in politics, I would not have got involved'. Another highlighted the impact of her family member holding a political position not only as a mobilising factor but also as a factor that she thought had paved the way for her advancement to a decision-making level in her political party. She stressed his position and relationships with other members of the party, without which, she explained, 'I have to admit that I am not sure that I would be in this position'.

The interviewees who focused the discussion on their time at university revealed its significance in propelling them into political life by triggering their political interest and mobilising them and their fellow female and male colleagues into active engagement. In the words of one interviewee: 'The university is a place where all people get involved [in politics].' In terms of the process, one interviewee explained, 'When I started there [university], they asked for my first name, my family name and where I am from to work out my potential political affiliation.' Based on this information, she was approached by representatives of two political parties who asked her to run in the university elections as their candidate. One interviewee said, 'I am sociable and I have friends and can reach out to all sides.' Another agreed: 'They are looking for sociable and popular people who they believe will win the elections for them.'

Importantly, the interviewees also revealed that being involved in campus politics was significant for them because it provided opportunities for them to obtain the experience and tools required for advancement in political life. Some of the young women suggested that, if you are seen as having potential for being an asset in student politics, you are likely to be approached by other party members and encouraged to undertake roles of greater responsibility, and promoted into similar roles in the political party youth wings. They reported that they were able to gain skills, to build networks and to gain confidence in their own abilities. They highlighted the significance of being exposed to a variety of projects and activities and incrementally gained and honed skills through practice. To quote some of the interviewees who spoke on this topic: 'I worked a lot in those first few months; I spoke with everyone regardless of their background; I sat with them and made my ideas clear to them.' Another interviewee said, 'I was talking with all the leaders in our party and in other parties and I had to learn about talking.' A third explained, 'I ran for elections and lost. At this point I realised that you have to campaign and have outreach. I ran again and was elected to a leadership position.' This interviewee went on to explain, 'I was involved in resolving administrative problems, I had to build relationships and network; I was learning how to take on more responsibility and to be more organised.' Yet another woman stressed how important it was 'not to be quiet in meetings; you need to show your presence; you need to force them to acknowledge you'.

The interviewees further thought that these processes gave them the opportunity to build confidence. One young woman explained, 'I did not plan, or want this [political leadership role] in the beginning. I was so scared and worried about trying to do it. After getting this position, I changed. When I managed to do it, I got the idea that I should and can be an agent of change.' Some of the interviewees felt that their managing to successfully hold a leadership position illustrated this capacity to their male peers and motivated their female peers.

A number of interviewees also highlighted the rise in levels of Lebanese women's education as being a significant factor that has, and will continue to have, a positive impact on women's mobilisation and ability to advance in Lebanese political parties. Young women see this trend as having opened the door for more women to access work and to pursue professional achievements and careers. The increase in women's presence in the workforce and the level of their professionalisation were also seen by the interviewees not only to contribute to creating a degree of financial independence for women but also to give women increased opportunities to gain exposure to higher levels of responsibility, to demonstrate their capabilities in diverse fields and at decision-making levels, to extend their networks and to improve their social status. Interviewees saw these as entry points from which young women could pursue deeper participation in their political parties. Some interviewees viewed higher education and careers as gateways to higher levels of political participation and cited them as being key to their strategy for ascending in political structures. As one interviewee said, 'You need to invest in your education to develop in politics. You need a master's degree or a PhD and a professional career to be in leadership roles.' Indeed, there is gender parity in overall educational enrolment, and female enrolment in secondary and tertiary education is higher than that of males. However, these trends have yet to be reflected in the country's political and economic structures.

Some interviewees suggested that there is an increase in political will at the higher levels to increase women's representation in politics and that this, in turn, is being reflected in the party structures. They cited recent debates about introducing a quota for women in parliament as an expression of this interest. A number of interviewees also believed that the appointment for the first time of a female Minister of Finance, Raya Haffar El Hassan (appointed in November 2009 and holding office as of June 2011), is an expression of the acknowledgement from the political leadership that there is a need to promote women to leadership positions in politics. One interviewee explained, 'Until now women were not playing this [strategic] role; they were in their positions because of their familial ties and were not active.' Another woman added, 'She [the Minister of Finance] is very intelligent, qualified and active. She has proposed a good plan and she is showing that women are capable.' Her links to higher leading male politicians aside, interviewees suggest that the appointment of Raya Haffar El Hassan broke new ground as it contributes to changing the image of politics as 'the business of men' and demonstrates to women that they can aspire to the higher positions. 'It is about having support from the top,' one interviewee said. Another young woman touched on the argument that political leadership can effectively bring about change in this area when she suggested: 'We had many more women in politics at the municipal level because of the push from our leaders.'

## Factors Prohibiting Young Women's Political Participation

Reflecting on their own experiences, some interviewees felt strongly that, if a woman has the capability, she will manage to assume positions of power in politics. 'If you are committed and willing to work, no one will stop you,' one interviewee asserted. Although this truth does hold for certain individual cases, women's access to decision-making positions and committees is obviously limited in a more systematic way. Although it was clearly expressed by interviewees that the official policies and bylaws do not discriminate against women, as some interviewees stated, official stipulations tend to differ in practice. In the opinion of one interviewee: 'In our culture, women are associated with specific roles. It is a patriarchal society. Although there are no formal restrictions on women who choose to enter politics, there are deeply embedded attitudes [against women's activities].' Another young woman added, 'Though gender equality is within our party's policy and ideology and women are in decision-making roles, the patriarchal mentality still comes across.'

When asked what they thought was behind women's low levels of participation in Lebanon's political life, interviewees believed that the 'prevailing patriarchal system and norms' were the

root cause. Some interviewees suggested that the traditional roles that women are expected to play in the family are an expression of these norms. They explained that the division of labour within the family unit shapes women's priorities and limits their capacity to commit to their political party. Women are increasingly trying to balance the demands of employment with taking care of their family and household. Under these circumstances, young women said that the first item to be sacrificed is political activity. One interviewee asserted, 'In the party they want and they need highly qualified women. It is a rarity to manage to find a woman who is highly educated and interested in politics with the financial and familial status that will allow her to be deeply engaged.' Considering that she would like to maintain her political engagement and have a family, one young woman predicted, 'There will be cycles. I will adapt and have higher and lower participation depending on what stage of my life I am in.' Some believed that this issue is one that can be addressed; it is possible to respond to the needs and interests of having a family if concessions are made and responsibilities are equally shared within the family unit. As one interviewee put it, 'They tend to say, behind every great man, there is a great woman. Well, for there to be a great woman, there needs to be a great man.'

In some cases, this perspective was seen as being expressed by the local social environment. Interviewees pointed to the experiences of parents, extended families and neighbourhoods that encouraged the political mobilisation of men over women or, in some cases, actively discouraged females from becoming involved in political affairs. One of the interviewees asserted, 'In families the boy is always reared for politics. If a woman is involved in politics, her immediate social circle would say: what does she want in politics? Is there not a man in the family?' Another young woman stated, 'If my brother was at the right age, do you think they would have chosen me? No. My brother is younger but, now that he has grown, my family says that I can give him my place.' One interviewee suggested that these conditions express but also reinforce the patriarchal norms that do not even allow 'space for imagination' when it comes to women who have political aspirations.

Reflecting on the reasons for women's weak presence in political life, one interviewee noted that 'it is not a matter of women; even men do not have much participation in this system'. This highlights the awareness of young women of another dimension of the distribution of power in Lebanon, i.e. that power and influence are based on familial and patronage networks. There is no doubt that women have a weaker role in Lebanon's political life. This is visible on all levels and in political parties, especially in positions of power. One young woman said, 'Within the parties there should be reforms to increase participation of women, but in terms of getting to the higher levels of political participation, well, it is the male family members who generally benefit.' From 1953 to 2009 there have been 0 to 6 women elected to a 128-member parliament. Since 2004 there have been 1 to 2 women assigned as ministers out of a total of 30 ministers. Although there are no precise figures for the percentages of women's party membership and participation in executive councils, it is estimated at between 30 and 50 percent. Figures for women's representation in executive committees are estimated at between approximately 0 and 30 percent. One interviewee said, 'Let me give you an example from this party. The candidate that is running now is not bad, but his sister is much more capable and promising. Yet she has been side-lined. She is part of the campaign for her brother, not running herself.' Another young woman explained, 'At the end of the day, parties are governed by the need to win, so they pick male candidates.'

The combination of the consociational political system with patriarchal norms and structures was also cited by interviewees as a significant constraint to women's access to higher levels of political power. For example, as one interviewee stated, 'I would like to be a parliamentarian in the future, but my sect has a specific number of seats assigned to it and, as men are more acceptable candidates, each party has a strategic interest in promoting male over female candidates.' Furthermore, access to political positions, especially on the higher levels, tends to be governed by familial ties, specifically from male to male relatives. As one interviewee said, 'The parties are mostly sectarian; the sects have leaders who will be in their place until they are replaced by their sons. You get to

your place through your familial ties and, specifically, from man to man. The only gate is through a man.’ The way in which women have traditionally entered parliament, “in black”, attests to this dynamic. Several interviewees saw this as one of the reasons to manage aspirations and to not invest in political careers as there are insurmountable barriers. One interviewee remembered, ‘While I was at university, I was approached by many parties that wanted me to run in elections as an independent candidate, but I was not interested. I thought that there was nothing I could get out of it, it is a waste of time and I should prioritise my career. That is why women become active in civil society; they know that their chances to advance are much higher there.’

The socio-economic structures that disadvantage women were also put forward as crucial factors that underlie women’s weak presence in the country’s political life. Interviewees made specific references to the difference between income and income opportunities. Young women were aware that, despite the fact that women have now surpassed their male peers in secondary and tertiary education enrolment, this has not led to equal opportunities in the workforce, where women secure only one-third of the number of jobs that men do.<sup>5</sup> This was seen as having a negative impact on women’s ability to engage with political life and to advance themselves in political parties, as they need a certain level of income and time to do so. As one interviewee stated, ‘When someone is struggling to secure their basic needs, being politically active is not a priority.’

Many young women identified Lebanon’s legal framework as a structure that severely constrains women’s ability to equally participate in the country’s political life because it institutionalises gender-based discrimination and reinforces unequal power relations. One young woman said, ‘Society is deeply patriarchal. This exists in every country to a greater or lesser extent. Here it is the law too! You are half a citizen!’ Article 7 of the Lebanese constitution guarantees equality of rights, obligations and duties for all citizens without distinctions. In 1990 there was an amendment that asserted Lebanon’s commitment ‘to apply the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in all domains without exception’. Many interviewees, however, noted that, despite ratifying CEDAW in 1997, the Lebanese state continues to have reservations to article 9, paragraph 2 and article 16, paragraphs 1 (c), (d), (f) and (g) of the Convention that relate to ensuring women’s equality in legislation governing the acquisition of nationality and marriage and family relations. Specifically, discrimination against women in legislation remains in the Nationality Law, penal code (notably, honour crimes, rape and adultery) and personal status laws.<sup>6</sup> This legal landscape underpins women’s limited participation in the country’s political life. One interviewee explained the practical impacts of the legal discriminations: ‘The legal system puts women at such a disadvantage. Women carry a huge weight. Before a woman can get involved in politics, she needs to make sure that she has established a relationship with a man in order to have kids and transfer her nationality, to rent a house, to have her rights.’ One interviewee questioned: ‘How can a woman engage in politics, much less at the decision-making level, if she is effectively a second-class citizen?’

## Areas and Mechanisms for the Advancement of Young Women in Political Parties and Political Life

There seemed to be a general consensus that political parties could play a key role in improving the status of young women in politics and in society overall. As one interviewee put it: ‘if we want change, we cannot wait for the state, it is too weak. Only the parties can do this.’ Another said, ‘The parties must push society.’ A few interviewees, however, questioned the need for any active intervention to improve women’s status, because, as one stated, ‘Women’s improved status will come about as a natural and inevitable result of social processes that are under way.’

5 UN Development Programme (UNDP). Lebanon 2008–2009: The National Human Development Report p.142. Available at [http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/arabstates/lebanon/NHDR\\_Lebanon\\_20082009\\_En.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/national/arabstates/lebanon/NHDR_Lebanon_20082009_En.pdf)

6 *Al-Raida*, 2005–06, pp.13–53.

Several interviewees identified Lebanon's laws – specifically those regarding citizenship and nationality, the legal status laws, marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance and honour crimes – as being a priority area for intervention. As one young woman suggested, 'Changing mind-sets and changing the legislation is a dialectical process.' The women explained how the youth wings of some political parties are organising and undertaking projects that push for legal reforms. Strategies that were mentioned included research into legal discrimination, the formation of internal (i.e. within the political parties) working groups, and collaboration with NGOs, CSOs and internal women's departments, as well as campaigns.

Interviewees also highlighted the media as a strategic point of intervention. 'The media should stop portraying women as only artistic or sexual. Where are the women in political parties? We rarely hear them speak. We need to hear them voice their opinions and propositions. We need to see and hear more from the women who are active and influential in different fields.' Working with the media to increase the coverage for the social and economic contributions of women who are active in politics and a variety of fields and of those who are positive role models for young women was suggested as a potential area for collaboration. Young women thought that providing alternative narratives on women's abilities and potentials would contribute to challenging traditional perceptions of women as destined for domestic roles and as less capable in the public sphere.

Among young women in political parties, the most contentious method of advancing women in politics was by far the idea of the implementation of quotas, both at a national level and according to internal (within the political party) quota systems. Some were clearly against it, with one interviewee saying that she found it 'demeaning', while another claimed, 'I do not think there is a need to look at this in a gender way. Why should we? What is there to gain by having women in parliament? Can men not represent women's interests as well?' Others adopted the opposite perspective, explaining that, even though quotas may constitute a discriminatory system, as long as they were effective mechanisms for increasing women's political participation, they should be implemented as temporary measures. 'The quota is not fair, but, if we agree on a target percentage, then everyone will have to mobilise around this goal. They will be interested in educating and training women to ensure that their parties are putting forward competitive candidates.' Another interviewee added, 'We need to get used to seeing women in political life, to normalise it!' Referring to the country's consociational political system, another young woman questioned: 'If everyone else gets into politics through a quota system, why not this one?'

Bridging the divide between more traditional areas of Lebanon and Beirut, which is seen as being particularly liberal with respect to women's role in politics, was also identified by interviewees as a potential point of action. Young women suggested that parties could hold cross-country campaigns and educational events with the objective of raising awareness and support among constituencies for the mobilisation of young women into political life.

In terms of mechanisms for advancing women within the political parties, interviewees put a number of ideas forward, including:

- Integrating the objective of increasing women's representation as a central issue in party agendas.
- Forming internal committees with the responsibility for monitoring the implementation of such an agenda in a sustained way.
- Forming bodies that are responsible for recruiting women in political parties and that would carry out tasks such as:
  - identifying women with the interest and commitment to be involved; and
  - ensuring that they are well prepared to reach the higher levels by offering trainings in areas such as public speaking, debate and political science.
- Ensuring that women with such interest and commitment are given opportunities to gain experience in diverse positions and with increasing levels of responsibility. A fair number of

the young women described personal experiences whereby they demonstrated they were highly capable in their academic capacity as well as in social outreach, which led higher-ranking members of their parties to suggest that they run in student body elections. The process of running for elections, campaigning and participating directly in decision-making bodies were experiences that gave them the confidence to pursue increased political involvement in the future.

- Calling internal meetings specifically for young women, who would be invited to debate issues and voice propositions.
- Ensuring flexibility with regards to the levels and frequencies with which women were able to commit to politics depending on their current roles in their personal lives. The women decided it was important to maintain contact with women who were less active for periods of time and to 'let them know that they were still valued', as one interviewee advised. It was considered that, if contact was maintained in this way, women would find it easier to return when they were able to increase their levels of commitment again.
- Another mechanism that was considered was rotating or shared presidency of the party.
- Some of the party youth wings had introduced an internal quota system to ensure a minimum representation of both genders in the leadership committees.

## Conclusion

Although there is agreement that women's political participation should increase, there is much less clarity around how this objective should be achieved and to what extent it should be prioritised. Many interviewees at Alert's conference on gender equality framed women's low levels of participation as being a result of a lack of interest from the side of young women, a question of personal choice, while others explained it as a symptom of historically shaped social, political, economic structures and social conditioning. Strategies about whether and how to address the issue vary accordingly with opinions including the view that no action need be taken to effect change in this area to the position that deep-reaching reforms need to be made in order to achieve gender equality in politics and society overall.

Ensuring that women are represented in the country's politics seems to be approached as a secondary if not tertiary concern. Women's political participation and their status in society overall tend to be perceived as issues that pertain to special interest groups rather than linked to the core of a functioning democracy, as the experience of one of the interviewees illustrates: 'When I approached our leadership team saying that I think that our party should be working on this, they told me to "gather a few other women and to work on it".' These issues become insulated from mainstream politics and deprioritised. At the same time, although it may not be perceived as an innately political concern, the gender lens provides significant insights into the power bases and dynamics, and when it comes to moving into planning strategies that have policy reform and other practical implications it becomes apparent that the terrain is highly sensitive and deeply political. These tendencies, among others, have contributed to ensuring that initiatives to tackle gender inequality "slip through the cracks".

In many ways, the nature of women's participation in politics and the factors that govern it are not dissimilar to those faced around the globe. However, when it comes to shaping interventions aimed at affecting positive change in this area, it will be important to take into account that there are a set of factors that are specific to the Lebanese context. Specifically, further exploration of the relationship between the confessional political system, the legal framework that underpins it, the political culture that accompanies it and gender is required. How do these factors impact on women's place in the intrinsically linked political and social spheres? Which actors are best placed to effect change and how can they be engaged? Where and how can beneficial synergies be built? A deeper understanding of these links will be key to enhancing capacity to move forward in strategic and innovative ways.



## Annex 1

# Dialogue with Youth Members of Political Parties

### A summary of conference participants' responses

The following is a summary of the responses conference participants gave to three sets of questions concerning gender inequality and the status of Lebanese women in politics.

**First, why do we see so few Lebanese women in politics? What are the obstacles to women's political mobilisation and advancement? Why aren't more women in decision-making positions in political parties?**

'Women do not participate mainly because of social issues. Women were led to believe by the media that they do not have to have a role in politics and instead just have to be beautiful and have a role in their families. Thus, women do not feel involved. Also, there is a fair amount of risk involved in entering politics; this is an obstacle. Another main obstacle relates to marriage. After marriage, the choice becomes family or party. With marriage, for instance, there is less time to train in the military camps. Moreover, we have a colleague in our party who noted that there are many women in the workplace who don't have time to balance a job as well [as political party involvement]. Why aren't women in decision-making roles? In the 1960s and 70s women were involved in the struggle but received no appreciation and got discouraged. We're still young and we have decision-making skills, and yet we are fought on some issues. We as women have to work together and express ourselves. We need to make women feel involved in politics.'

'I agree but would add that Lebanon is a patriarchal society. Women have a role to play in society, but only in the civil society. Women are kindhearted, but the concept of politics in Lebanon is that it is more violent and includes political risks. That is why society doesn't encourage women's participation. Another reason is restrictive electoral law, which does not allow for competition based on true merit. Yet another reason is the economic marginalisation of women, who are not always working and are not able to work. Also, there is a lack of training and capacity building. What about the obstacles? There are differentiations between the roles of men and women, and women are encouraged to play a role in the household. Why aren't more women in decision-making roles? Political parties don't give that space to women. Moreover, many political parties think that it's enough for women to reach certain levels and that they don't have ambitions to reach higher levels. There is a struggle and women need to exert more effort.'

'The aspects that are relevant to this issue are education levels, Lebanon's religious environment and its patriarchal society. Also, certain legislation (i.e. like the Nationality Law) is a clear obstacle. Women should provide the household with certain services. Penal code is biased against women according to the honour code. Politics also always prioritises men over women. Plus, women do not have full citizenship. Finally, there are issues of quota and gender discrimination.'

'Some women aren't interested in politics, and historically there was limited participation among women. There is a fear of instability and these things frighten some women. Traditionally, women are meek and should be away from the violence. There should be capacity building because the women are made to feel like they should stay in the home. Political bylaws are unequal. Lebanon is a patriarchal society. Women also feel incapable of contributing to society. Regarding women in decision-making roles: such roles were given to men in wartime and there is no experience among women. Many times, we are afraid because we are made to change.'

‘Lebanon is a patriarchal society, but there is also a lot of clientelism. Women don’t participate in political parties, which is why they should be given a larger role in civil society. Politics is described as being full of fear, violence and corruption. All of these things are traditionally very “un-womanlike”. We also struggle with a lack of awareness of politics in society. On decision-making: most political parties in Lebanon come from families. There are few political parties with strategies to attract women. Thus, women must be even more perfect if they want to be accepted.’

‘There are some people here who don’t see that it is a problem that few women are involved in political parties. Second, bylaws in political parties do not allow women a large role. Some difficult situations in the past have caused women to stay in the home. Women are weaker and can’t fight. So, none of the laws of the political parties allows them to participate. Of course, political parties want more members, but societies are patriarchal so women don’t participate.’

### Second, in 2019, how would you like to see the role and status of women in politics?

‘I think that the role of women should be reinforced through the implementation of a civic system, and not through other types of channels. Currently people are getting into the political system too often because of their family connections. Similarly, we must end discriminatory laws, status code, honour crimes, etc.’

‘We should reach a period where women are enjoying all rights, economic, social, political, etc. We want women handling important ministries as well, such as defence. We need to change stereotypes about women in our society. We should strive for women to be able to enjoy an equal role as mothers and politicians. We need equality in the constitution that is actually implemented. Women should also be allowed to have full citizenship in 2019.’

‘I hope that by 2019 we will stop worrying about women’s rights because we will have achieved equality. We need more women leaders in parliament and political parties. I agree that women should be able to pass on their nationality to their children. Also, we need to move towards ending salary discrimination by this time.’

### Third, what is the particular role of political parties in promoting women in politics? What is your role, as youth in political parties, in promoting change and achieving your vision? What do you need (what assistance, support, training) to help you accomplish this?

‘First of all, the role of political parties is to help women obtain political representation. This can be done at the level of municipal elections. Second, there should be support for electoral law. We must encourage political parties to support proportional representation, with printed lists. There should be training and seminars targeting both men and women in political parties. Women need access to media and public relations. As far as our role in change: two types of people are marginalised in Lebanon – the youth and women. If these two groups worked together, more force could be exerted.’

‘We need to apply these things we are saying to our youth movements and youth departments first. We need to set the example through this type of action.’

‘We must eliminate all kinds of discrimination, promote civil rights and protection from sexual harassment, penalise violators and prevent women from being viewed as a commodity. We have to promote the role of women to give them a more powerful role in political parties. We can’t expect a woman to join and then marginalise her. Political parties sometimes leave out women: there need to be lobbying tools, songs, things like this, and we need to do the work for this. If everyone thinks that their party is the best, we are headed in the wrong direction. Quotas need to be implemented in the parties. Finally, we should also stress networking and empowerment among women themselves.’

'I think we, as parties, should start by changing our bylaws. There should be reforms that grant women a larger role. Women need to know that not all political parties marginalise females and that some parties care to implement real reform. This can be done through intensive programmes and seminars. We need to concentrate on presenting draft laws to parliament to strive for women's rights. Finally, it is true that, as youth, we can really play a role here. We should target ages from 6 to 13 and teach anti-discrimination from that point onwards. Also, because we are young we can use social networking and network with media for greater coverage of these issues.'

'I believe political parties have a role to play. They give experience and foster political awareness. We should acknowledge participation and challenge traditional views within our parties. We need to have mobilisation in the parties and we, as youth, can start this. We also need cooperation to benefit from previous experiences of NGOs and older people in the parties.'

## Conference Attendees

### Conference Participants:

#### Invited Speakers (in order of presentation):

Ms Jane Morrice – International Speaker, Northern Ireland

Ms Stine Renate Håheim – International Speaker, Norway

Dr Sofia Saadeh – Lebanese Speaker, Academic

Dr Marguerite Helou – Lebanese Speaker, Academic

Ms Mirna Abdelnour – Lebanese Speaker, Municipal Government Representative

### Political Parties with representatives in attendance:

(In order of sign-in sheet): The Amal Movement, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Democratic Left Movement, the Democratic Renewal Movement, the Baath Party, the Arab Democratic Party, the Free Patriotic Movement, the Future Movement, the Green Party of Lebanon, the Lebanese Forces Party, the Lebanese Democratic Party, the Kataib Party, the Marada Movement, the National Liberal Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Tachnaq Party, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya.

**Workshop Moderator:** Mr Oussama Safa

### International Alert Workshop Staff:

Ms Elinor Bray-Collins – International Alert, Country Director, Lebanon

Mr Phil Champain – International Alert, Director of Programmes

Ms Victoria Louise Stamadianou – International Alert, Project Officer

Mr Michael Huijjer – Project Officer

Mr Charlie Berdahl – International Alert, Intern & English Rappateur

Mr Jad Merhi – Arabic Rappateur

## Conference Programme

9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. Morning Conference: *Engaging Young Women in Politics: International and Lebanese Perspectives*

9:30 – 11:00 a.m. Panel One – International Perspectives:

**Ms Jane Morrice, Northern Ireland – ‘From Belfast to Beirut: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Conflict and the Women’s Coalition’.** *Former Deputy Speaker of the first Northern Ireland Assembly set up under the Good Friday Peace Agreement, Ms Morrice will share her experience of political life in the very early days of the peace process. As a founding member of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, a political party set up to encourage women into politics, she will describe her role in the male-dominated politics of the time and show how she and her party colleagues managed, with little or no previous experience, to help change the face of politics in Northern Ireland.*

**Ms Stine Renate Håheim, Norway – ‘Equal on Paper, Not in Practice: My Experience as a Young Female Politician in Norway’.** *As one of the youngest MPs in the Norwegian parliament, Ms Håheim will discuss her personal experience as a young woman entering politics and political party life. She will discuss the history of women’s struggle to gain equality in Norwegian politics and society and the methods that helped women gain better representation. Ms Håheim will also discuss the types of changes and work required to achieve gender equality, as well as socio-economic equality in society.*

### Question and Answer Session

11:15 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. Panel Two – Lebanese Perspectives:

**Dr Sofia Saadeh – ‘Women in Lebanese Politics: Underlying Causes of Women’s Lack of Representation in Lebanese Politics’.** *Dr Saadeh will discuss the connections between the structure of the Lebanese political system (i.e. the system of confessionalism) and the lack of gender equality in Lebanese society and politics. She will explain why Lebanese sectarianism results in a disadvantaged status for women in terms of both their rights and their mobilisation and advancement into politics. In discussing these underlying causes for women’s inequality in Lebanon, Dr Saadeh will highlight particular challenges, including how the lack of a civil code and religious personal status laws systematically disadvantage women and limit their advancement in Lebanese society.*

**Dr Marguerite Helou – ‘Lebanese Women and Political Parties: History, Issues and Options for Reform’.** *Dr Helou will discuss more specific issues relating to women in political parties in Lebanon, including the repercussions of the Lebanese system for shaping political society and political parties. Dr Helou will outline the historical experiences of women in political parties in Lebanon and the factors that influence women’s mobilisation and advancement (or the lack thereof) in parties and Lebanese politics more generally. Placing Lebanon in a comparative context vis-à-vis other states in the Arab region, Dr Helou will also discuss the importance of “modernising” political party structures, including the way in which building internal institutions that promote equality and democracy within the parties, such as internal elections and quota systems, can help to promote women in political parties and political society more generally.*

**Ms Mirna Abdelnour – ‘Experiences in Running in Municipal Elections’.** *Ms Abdelnour will discuss her recent experience running for municipal council. She will describe the challenges as well as the opportunities she faced as a woman entering politics at this level. Ms Abdelnour will*

*highlight the role youth can play in municipal politics and how young people in political parties can help to promote young women's political engagement.*

### **2:00 – 5:30 p.m. Afternoon Workshop: Young Members of Political Parties: Dialogue on Young Women and Political Engagement**

The afternoon workshop was devoted to dialogue among young political party members on issues surrounding women's engagement and advancement in Lebanese politics and political parties. Mr Oussama Safa was the facilitator of the afternoon workshop.

**2:00 – 2:15 p.m. Ms Victoria Stamadianou, Project Officer, International Alert – 'Perspectives of Young Women in Political Parties on Women and Politics in Lebanon'.** *Ms Stamadianou will present a summary of International Alert's research on how young women in political parties today perceive the issues surrounding women's political engagement.*

### **2:15 – 5:00 p.m. Dialogue with Youth Members of Political Parties**

*Three main questions will be addressed in this dialogue session:*

#### **First: Analysing the Issue of Young Women in Political Parties**

Why do we see so few Lebanese women in politics? What are the obstacles to women's political mobilisation and advancement? Why aren't more women in decision-making positions in political parties?

#### **Second: Articulating Visions**

In 2019, how would you like to see the role and status of women in politics?

#### **Third: Identifying the Steps to Change**

To achieve your vision, what changes need to happen and how? What is the particular role of political parties in promoting women in politics? What is your role, as youth in political parties, in promoting change and achieving your vision? Lastly, what do you need (what assistance, support, training) to help you accomplish this?



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