

SHIFTING NARRATIVES: TOWARDS ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Workshop 3

Advancing women's political participation in
politics and public administration in Lebanon



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Part I: Overview And Background

According to the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, Lebanon ranked 132nd out of 146 countries with a score of 0.628¹ on closing the gender gap. The global ranking is a result of low scores on primary indicators Lebanon scored: (127th) on Economic Participation and Opportunity, (90th) on Educational Attainment, (68th) on Health and Survival, and most relevant to this paper, the lowest indicator (144th) on Political Empowerment.²

The latter illustrates women's limited political participation in Lebanon, including but not limited to representation in parliament and active involvement in leading ministries and public administration. The weak participation is linked to many factors, including a consociational sectarian political system, legal and legislative barriers that fail to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable groups, namely women, patriarchal and conservative attitudes towards gender roles, the involvement of women in public affairs, and institutional barriers characterized by deeply-rooted corruption, clientelism, and tokenism.

In Lebanon, the political landscape, as well as the public administration one, is heavily dominated by a select few: male elites who wield significant influence and power within the system and often perpetuate control through familial networks, where positions of authority and privilege are passed down from generation to generation. Sons, brothers, or nephews of established male leaders typically inherit their predecessors' positions, ensuring the continuity of familial legacies within the political and administrative spheres.³

This approach to governance perpetuates a cycle of entrenched power and privilege, where access to key decision-making roles remains largely restricted to those within well-established circles, which men dominate. Consequently, this system marginalizes other segments of society, including women, limiting their opportunities for meaningful participation in politics and public administration.

The Lebanese government has failed to pass a quota law that guarantees a minimum number of seats allocated for women in parliament, cabinet, or directorates general. In 2006, women's organizations advocated for a 30 percent quota for women in parliamentary seats, leading to the drafting of a bill proposing such a quota by the National Commission on Electoral Law. This bill aimed to integrate the majoritarian and proportional systems. Despite these efforts, the bill did not pass, and ongoing endeavors persist to establish a quota for women in

¹ WEF (2023). [Global Gender Gap Index](#).

² WEF (2023). [Global Gender Gap Index](#).

³ JOSEPH, S. (2011). Political Familism in Lebanon. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 636, 150–163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41328556>



parliament.⁴ Another attempt led by the Council of Ministers in 2010 to allocate seats on the municipal councils for women also did not materialize.⁵

Within this context, the Embassies of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden in Lebanon, in partnership with the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut and UN Women, convened a workshop on April 4th, 2024 to discuss the challenges to women's involvement in Lebanese politics and public administration. The workshop highlighted the myriad legal and policy obstacles confronting women in Lebanon, including the exclusionary electoral law, the absence of a quota system, and restrictive personal status laws. It also addressed broader structural barriers such as economic hardships, cultural biases, and institutional challenges that impede women's meaningful political participation. This discussion is particularly timely given the deadlock in the presidential vote, escalating restrictions on civil liberties, and the deepening economic crisis, and war in South Lebanon, all of which heighten the vulnerabilities of women and marginalized groups. Therefore, this workshop underscores the important role of women in leadership positions to foster gender-sensitive policymaking and address the challenges that hinder their meaningful participation in politics.

The workshop featured a panel discussion moderated by lawyer and human rights activist Manar Zaiter, highlighting prominent female leaders in public administration, politics, and civil society. Among the panelists were Member of Parliament Dr. Halima Kaakour, Ministry of Agriculture's Director General of Cooperatives Ms. Gloria Abou Zeid, Former Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Ms. Wafaa Dikah Hamze, and FiftyfiftyLB Co-Founder Ms. Joelle Abou Farhat. Each panelist explored the challenges encountered by women in these domains, discussing their personal, institutional, and societal implications, and offering recommendations for a path forward.

⁴ Civil Society Knowledge Center (2006). A bill to for a 30% quota for women in the Parliament. <https://civilsociety-centre.org/content/bill-30-quota-women-parliament>

⁵ Helou, M. (2009). Women Quota in Lebanon: A False Promise? *Al Raida*, 58-65.

PART II: CHALLENGES

A) Legal and legislative challenges

1. **Exclusionary electoral law:** Lebanon's electoral law poses severe obstacles to achieving gender parity in political representation. Although the new electoral law passed in 2017 (Law No 44/2017) introduced significant reforms to the electoral framework and aimed at enhancing representation and inclusion, it did not achieve its intended objective.⁶ Designed to perpetuate the dominance of ruling elites, the flawed proportional law marginalizes non-traditional political actors, including but not limited to women. While the law incorporates notable reforms, it includes provisions that may undermine the transition from a majoritarian to a proportional system, such as small district sizes and the method of casting preferential votes. Additionally, it imposes a high limit on campaign spending and lacks provisions for an independent commission to oversee the election process or establish a women's quota. The inherent biases in the electoral system serve as a barrier to women's participation, reinforcing existing power dynamics and hindering efforts to promote inclusivity.
2. **Lack of a gender quota:** The adoption and effective implementation of quota systems face significant challenges in Lebanon. Resistance from traditional power structures and cultural norms often impedes the establishment of effective quota mechanisms. Additionally, the absence of clear enforcement mechanisms undermines the impact of a gender quota in Lebanon, limiting its ability to ensure meaningful representation of women in decision-making processes. The absence of a gender quota in the electoral law is the primary obstacle to fostering women's meaningful political participation. Despite initial commitments from senior politicians to include a quota during the drafting process, the final law omitted this provision. Justifications for its exclusion, such as labeling quotas as insulting to women, contradict international experiences that emphasize the effectiveness of temporary special measures, like quotas, in promoting women's participation in elected bodies.⁷
3. **Personal status laws and systemic discrimination:** Lebanon's personal status laws play a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality and violence against women. These laws, deeply entrenched in both sectarian and religious frameworks, often uphold patriarchal norms that prioritize the authority of men and restrict the rights and autonomy of women. Legal interpretations and religious practices frequently reinforce discriminatory attitudes and practices,

⁶ Taha, A. (2022). The controversy over amending the 2017 Electoral Law. Lebanese Center for Political Studies. <https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/articles/details/3645/the-controversy-over-amending-the-2017-election-law>

⁷ UN Women & LADE. (2021). A gender analysis of the 2017 Lebanese electoral law. UNWOMEN. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/2100967-Lebanese-Electoral-Law-EN-WEB-final.pdf>

further marginalizing women⁸ within society. These laws and customary practices often result in unequal treatment of women in matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance rights. Moreover, the absence of comprehensive legal protections and mechanisms for addressing gender-based violence leaves women vulnerable to various forms of abuse and discrimination.

B) Political and institutional challenges

1. **Role of traditional and established parties hinder women's political emancipation:** Lebanon's traditional political parties have historically shown reluctance to support women, despite relying on them for various roles within informal politics. While women often play integral roles in informal networks and grassroots movements affiliated with political parties, they frequently encounter barriers to formal political participation and leadership positions within party structures. In their effort to prioritize maintaining the status quo and preserving existing power structures, they often exclude or marginalize women from positions of influence and decision-making. Women are often excluded or marginalized from positions of influence and decision-making, which maintains the status quo and reinforces existing power structures. As a result, women find themselves restricted and relegated to supportive roles or tokenistic positions within party structures, rather than being afforded genuine opportunities for leadership and representation. Despite the evident contributions of women to informal politics and grassroots activism, the resistance of traditional political parties to support women reflects broader systemic barriers to political gender parity in Lebanon.
2. **Corruption and lack of accountability:** The prevalence of corruption and the absence of accountability within Lebanon's political system undermine efforts to address discrimination against women and perpetuate the status quo. Corruption erodes trust in public institutions and eliminates incentives for meaningful reforms that promote gender equality. The lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms allows discrimination against women to persist unchecked, hindering progress towards gender parity in political representation and decision-making roles.
3. **Difficulty in managing gender dynamics when attaining leadership positions:** Assuming leadership roles in departments with varying gender compositions poses distinct challenges for women, particularly in managing perceptions. This was particularly evident in cases where the public administration was accustomed to male directors, leading to instances of harassment and mansplaining (the condescending or patronizing explanation of something, often delivered by a man to a woman) and a lack of serious consideration for female directors by subordinates solely based on their gender. Furthermore, female leaders often introduced reformist agendas, which faced resistance from the directorate.

⁸ Human Rights Watch. (2015). (rep.). Human Rights Watch Submission to the CEDAW Committee of Lebanon's Periodic Report 62nd Session (pp. 1–11). Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 2024

C) Sectarian, social, and cultural challenges

1. **Patriarchal and traditional gender norms:** Societal expectations are largely shaped by traditional gender roles in Lebanon, confining women primarily to domestic spheres and undervaluing their contributions to public life. These norms perpetuate patriarchal attitudes, limiting women's agency and decision-making power, particularly within male-dominated arenas like politics. Moreover, the stigma surrounding women's participation in politics further discourages them from seeking leadership roles or engaging in public discourse as there exists a constant fear of failure and consequently judgment from their respective communities.
2. **Religious conservatism and sectarian divisions:** Religious interpretations and sectarian affiliations in Lebanon significantly impact societal attitudes towards women's participation in politics. Some interpretations reinforce gender-based stereotypes and restrictions, further marginalizing women in political spheres. Lebanon's political landscape, rooted in sectarian divisions and led predominantly by male figures from established religious factions, presents formidable obstacles for women aspiring to political leadership. Particularly for women from smaller sectarian communities with limited parliamentary representation, the challenges are even more pronounced.
3. **Absence of communal support and inequality in opportunities:** Women in Lebanon often face limited support networks and mentorship opportunities, hindering their political aspirations and ability to navigate political structures effectively.⁹ Socioeconomic disparities, coupled with unequal access to education and employment opportunities, pose additional barriers to women's political engagement, particularly for those from marginalized communities. Additionally, family and community expectations prioritize women's domestic roles, leading to social pressure that discourages their participation in public affairs.
4. **Pervasive gender-based violence:** Gender-based violence remains a prevalent issue, occurring both within private spheres, homes, and broader society.¹⁰ The normalization and perpetuation of gender-based violence, fueled by patriarchal values, create an environment where women may feel intimidated or unsafe to engage in political activities. Fear of reprisal or retaliation from perpetrators of violence can deter women from participating in public life, including running for political office or voicing their opinions on social and political issues. Furthermore,

⁹ Nassif, G. (2020, March 4). Women's political participation in Lebanon and the limits of aid-driven empowerment - Lebanon. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/women-s-political-participation-lebanon-and-limits-aid-driven-empowerment-enar>

¹⁰ Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation. (2017, April). Women's political participation in Lebanon: Perspectives from Mount-Lebanon. IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/womens-political-participation-in-lebanon-perspectives-from-mount-lebanon/>



inadequacies in existing legal frameworks to address gender-based violence exacerbate women's vulnerabilities and undermine their trust in the justice system. The lack of effective legal protection and support services for survivors of violence may deter women from seeking justice or pursuing leadership roles in politics, as they may perceive a lack of institutional support and accountability.¹¹

5) Economic and financial challenges

1. **Access to capital and financial services:** Women in Lebanon encounter significant barriers when attempting to access financial resources and services. Discriminatory practices, such as high-interest rates and stringent collateral requirements, limit women's ability to secure loans and investments.¹² Cultural norms and societal expectations also restrict women's financial autonomy, resulting in limited economic opportunities. Additionally, the economic instability and financial crises that Lebanon has faced in recent years have further exacerbated these challenges, disproportionately affecting women's access to capital and hindering their economic independence and political participation.
2. **Unpaid care work:** Women in Lebanon often bear the primary responsibility for unpaid care work.¹³ Despite the crucial role that unpaid care work plays in sustaining communities, it is frequently undervalued and unrecognized. This perpetuates gender disparities, as women's time and energy spent on caregiving responsibilities limit their participation in formal and informal politics and hinder their ability to pursue political engagement.
3. **Inequitable distribution of wealth and resources:** Lebanon grapples with significant disparities in the distribution of wealth and resources, with a considerable concentration of wealth among a minority of the population. This inequitable distribution exacerbates economic inequalities and marginalizes vulnerable groups, including women. Such practices are also codified under family laws where in certain sects, inheritance laws discriminate against women, thus inherently placing them at a financial disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts.¹⁴ Limited access to economic resources and opportunities further hinders women's political empowerment, as financial constraints restrict their ability to participate in political processes, campaigns, and advocacy efforts.

¹¹ Dabbous, D. (2017, September). Legal Reform and women's rights in Lebanese Personal Status Laws. CMI. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320558138_Legal_Reform_and_Women's_Rights_in_Lebanese_Personal_Status_Laws

¹² ESCWA. (2022). Women's economic participation in Lebanon. UNESCWA. <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-economic-participation-lebanon-mapping-analysis-laws-english.pdf>

¹³ Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship. (2023, December 13). Shifting narratives: Outcome document on women's participation municipal elections in Lebanon. The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship. <https://asfariinstitute.org/2023/04/27/shifting-narratives-outcome-document-1/>

¹⁴ Bardan, Ahmad, لبنان، النزاع حول التنازع الداخلي القانوني والقضائي في لبنان (Inheritance and Wills: A Study on The Internal Conflicts Of Jurisdiction and Laws In Lebanon) (June 9, 2022). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4273283> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4273283>

PART III: IMPLICATIONS

1. **Female candidates face challenges in financing their electoral campaigns, thereby limiting their prospects of winning elections:** Women often encounter challenges in accessing the necessary financial resources to create effective campaigns, including fundraising, advertising, and organizing events. As a result, women candidates struggle to compete on an equal footing with their well-funded male counterparts, limiting their electoral success and representation in political offices. Limited access to fundraising and financial support networks further exacerbates this disparity. The high costs associated with political campaigns, (media advertising, campaign staff salaries, and travel expenses) also place women candidates at a distinct disadvantage when they lack comparable financial resources. This disparity can impact the visibility and outreach efforts of women candidates, limiting their ability to connect with voters and mobilize support effectively. Additionally, women candidates may face difficulty securing loans or financing options due to gender biases within financial institutions or cultural norms that prioritize male-led initiatives.
2. **Women's candidacy remains subject to male guardian's approval:** Legal discrimination, particularly through discriminatory family laws, creates significant barriers for women seeking a political career in Lebanon. Under these laws, women are often under the patronage and control of the male figure in their family, which can deter them from pursuing political ambitions. If a woman's candidacy is not accepted by the male guardian, she may face repercussions such as being segregated from her family or subjected to increased gender-based violence without adequate legal protection. This fear of repercussions and lack of legal safeguards can discourage women from actively participating in politics, perpetuating gender inequalities, and limiting women's representation in political decision-making processes.
3. **The burden of unpaid care work incentivizes women's exclusion from informal politics in Lebanon:** Informal networks play a crucial role in navigating Lebanon's political landscape, yet accessing these networks remains a major challenge for women. These networks, predominantly dominated by men, serve as gatekeepers to political opportunities, effectively excluding women from meaningful participation. The burden of unpaid care work further compounds this barrier, as women are culturally expected to fulfill domestic responsibilities, leaving them with limited time and energy to engage in political activities outside of official channels of enforcement. Meetings held late at night and in inaccessible locations leave additional barriers for women, exacerbating issues of mobility and participation. Moreover, these informal networks often perpetuate a culture of exclusion and discrimination, where women are neither welcomed nor appreciated. Consequently, women are forced to navigate through these networks to establish their presence in political discourse, as formal channels of enforcement lack the necessary support and legal frameworks to address gender disparities.



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4. **Public policies in Lebanon remain gender-blind and exclusionary considering women are left outside decision-making circles:** Public policies in Lebanon are often formulated without adequate consideration for gender perspectives, thus limiting women's ability to influence policy formulation and implementation processes. The lack of gender-sensitive policies fails to address the diverse needs and realities of women, leading to systemic inequalities and discrimination in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and social welfare. Women's voices and experiences are often side-lined in policy discussions and agenda-setting processes, undermining the principles of gender equality and democratic governance. Furthermore, the lack of institutional mechanisms for gender mainstreaming and accountability exacerbates the problem. Without robust mechanisms to ensure the integration of gender perspectives across all stages of the policy-making process, public policies continue to overlook the specific needs and priorities of women. An illustrative instance highlighting this issue occurred in 2020 when a group of seven male public officials¹⁵ compiled a list of 300 subsidized items as part of a subsidy policy to alleviate financial burdens on basic goods.¹⁶ Regrettably, menstrual pads were overlooked despite the prevailing issue of period poverty, while men's razors were subsidized. Hence, there is a need for more women in power for more gender-inclusive policies.

¹⁵ Prime Minister Hassan Diab; Ministers Raoul Nehme, Abbas Mortada, and Imad Hoballah; Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh; and Advisor to the Prime Minister Khodr Taleb and George Chalhoub.

¹⁶ López-Tomàs, A. (2023, March 2). Women in Lebanon find ways to tackle their own period poverty. The Media Line. <https://themedialine.org/people/women/women-in-lebanon-find-ways-to-tackle-their-own-period-poverty/>

PART IV: RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address the challenges women face to participate in politics and public administration in Lebanon meaningfully, it is essential to recognize the systemic nature of issues concerning personal status laws and the state's relationship with religious communities. This calls for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the implementation of quotas in politics. Additionally, there is a pressing need for holistic reforms that encompass various aspects including economic policies, taxation, governance, legislation, and cultural attitudes. By addressing these systemic issues, an enabling environment can be created to promote and enhance women's political participation in Lebanon.

1. **Legal and legislative reforms are necessary vis-à-vis all laws that are discriminatory and exclusionary against women:** Comprehensive legislative reform is imperative, particularly in addressing discriminatory laws and practices. This includes advocating and lobbying for laws and policies to combat gender-based violence and discrimination, both within political institutions and society at large. Improving transparency and accountability in legislative processes, alongside encouraging cooperation among legislators, civil society, and stakeholders, is vital for developing gender-sensitive legislation. Additionally, highlighting the need for comprehensive legislative reform, particularly in areas such as personal status laws, electoral laws, and labor laws through lobbying efforts involving women in Parliament, male allies, civil society organizations, and the National Committee, is crucial. Rethinking legislative approaches to consider the interconnectedness of laws and their broader societal impact is necessary.
2. **Adopting a quota system that guarantees the representation of women in politics and public administration:** The consensus among feminist activists regarding the importance of quotas for women in political participation highlights their recognition as a necessary temporary measure.¹⁷ This entails acknowledging the necessity of quotas and advocating for encouraging women to vote for other women, thereby changing societal attitudes towards female political leadership. Quotas are instrumental in achieving gender diversity within state institutions, facilitating the advancement of an intersectional feminist agenda. They are pivotal tools in combating patriarchal structures and systemic exclusion, fostering a more inclusive political landscape. By imposing quotas, one paves the way for greater representation and empowerment of women in governmental and legislative positions. Additionally, reflecting on the type of state desired, the effectiveness of quotas, and the involvement of stakeholders is crucial for achieving gender equality in political participation.

¹⁷ El Asmar, F. & El Ammar, M. (2023). Bridging the gaps: Feminist perspectives on policymaking and women's political participation in Lebanon. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/20333-20230614.pdf>



3. **Enhanced coordination and collaboration among all relevant stakeholders:** Women's political participation in Lebanon is intrinsically linked to prioritizing enhanced coordination and collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. Strengthening networking and collaborative efforts among legislators, civil society organizations, and stakeholders is imperative to advocate for women's rights and gender equality. This entails learning from experiences within civil society to inform future initiatives and promoting collaboration between national mechanisms, civil society, women's organizations, and the media to raise awareness and address societal challenges collectively. Additionally, improved coordination and communication between entities like the National Committee for Lebanese Women and Members of Parliament are essential for effective collaboration on legislative projects. Networking also plays a pivotal role, emphasizing the importance of connecting women in Parliament and aspiring candidates, while also involving men with progressive beliefs in these efforts. Furthermore, education is vital for instilling principles of equality from an early age, starting with schools and universities, hence collaboration with the relevant ministries and educational establishment is key to combatting gendered attitudes towards politics.
4. **Employing evidence-based research and knowledge dissemination as a tool of advocacy and legislative support:** To enhance women's political participation in Lebanon, it is imperative to prioritize the utilization of research and data in policymaking processes. This entails emphasizing evidence-based decision-making by drawing insights from research, particularly in gender studies, to inform legislative actions effectively. Additionally, allocating resources for conducting studies and collecting data is essential to support legislative initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's political participation in Lebanon. By relying on research and evidence-based knowledge, policymakers can make informed decisions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable political landscape in Lebanon.
5. **Promoting accountability and transparency in all government institutions is key to advancing gender equality in politics and public administration in Lebanon:** Accountability and transparency are paramount for promoting women's political participation in Lebanon. It is essential to prioritize merit-based selection for positions, emphasizing competence in parallel with gender. Holding individuals accountable for their performance, regardless of gender, is crucial for driving progress and development across society. In Parliament, increased transparency in proceedings, including public hearings involving relevant stakeholders, can enhance accountability and ensure that legislative decisions reflect the needs and concerns of the population, specifically the most vulnerable groups (women, girls, refugees, migrant workers, LGBTQI++ community, disabled persons...). Mechanisms allowing affected parties to express their opinions on legislative matters are essential for fostering an inclusive and responsive political environment that supports women's participation.



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6. **Advocacy for women's political participation in Lebanon is essential for promoting gender equality and challenging societal norms.** Asserting the demand for equal rights for women is crucial in advocating for gender equality. Encouraging male counterparts to participate in efforts to address gender-based discrimination and inequality can amplify advocacy efforts. Additionally, lobbying to change the environment of politics as safe pursuits can inspire women to engage in political activities. Utilizing lobbying and advocacy to raise awareness and mobilize support for legislative reforms is vital for advancing women's rights both within and outside political institutions. Nevertheless, addressing challenges related to unpaid care work and traditional gender roles, as well as challenging restrictive cultural norms, are necessary steps in creating an environment conducive to women's political participation. Furthermore, a reevaluation of the feminist movement's role in politics and society is needed to reclaim political agency and move beyond empowerment projects toward substantive change.



PART V: CONCLUSION

In summary, women's political participation in Lebanon is hindered by a multitude of challenges across legal, political, societal, economic, and cultural dimensions. Legal and legislative barriers perpetuate gender disparities in political representation. Traditional political parties' reluctance to support women and the prevalence of corruption further impede progress towards gender equality in politics. On a social and cultural level, norms, patriarchal attitudes, and conservatism reinforce gender-based stereotypes and limit women's agency in public life. Additionally, economic obstacles, such as limited access to financial resources and unpaid care work responsibilities, constrain women's ability to engage meaningfully and equitably in political processes.

These challenges have profound implications for women seeking to pursue a political career in Lebanon. They translate into significant barriers in financing campaigns, navigating legal discrimination, accessing political networks, and influencing policy. Moving forward, addressing the challenges hindering women's political participation in Lebanon requires a multifaceted approach. This includes comprehensive legal and legislative reforms to combat discriminatory practices, adopt quota systems, and enhance accountability and transparency in government institutions. In addition, collaboration among stakeholders, including legislators, civil society organizations, and the media, is essential for advocating for women's rights and promoting gender equality. Nevertheless, employing evidence-based research and knowledge dissemination can inform policymaking and support legislative initiatives aimed at advancing women's political participation. Additionally, advocacy efforts must prioritize promoting accountability, challenging societal norms, and empowering women to reclaim political agency.

By adopting these recommendations, Lebanon can create an enabling environment that fosters inclusive governance and enhances women's representation in politics and public administration.



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