

# **SHIFTING NARRATIVES: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO WOMEN'S FULL SOCIOECONOMIC INCLUSION IN LEBANON**

## **Workshop 1**

Barriers and Opportunities to Women's Full  
Socioeconomic Inclusion in Lebanon

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# Background

Lebanon today stands at a critical point attributable to the worsening economic collapse, political instability and uncertainty, and social fragmentation.<sup>1</sup> This state plays a strong role in deepening preexisting gender inequalities by reinforcing women's exclusion from formal economic opportunities, pushing more women into informal and unprotected labor. Weak and discriminatory legal frameworks, including personal status laws and nationality law, limit women's rights and ability to access protection.<sup>2</sup> Political patronage networks and sectarian clientelism further marginalize women from decision-making spaces, while shrinking social protection systems<sup>3</sup> leave women disproportionately burdened with unpaid care work and vulnerable to poverty. Women in Lebanon face significant socio-economic challenges, with a labor participation rate as low as 28% in 2023,<sup>4</sup> high unemployment rates, limited economic opportunities, with social protection programs that do not adequately address the needs of women while still playing a large role in informal labor through unpaid care work.<sup>5</sup>

With one of the lowest participation rates of women in the labor market globally, despite growing advocacy, women remain significantly excluded from the formal economy and decision-making platforms.<sup>6</sup> With structural exclusions that are systematic and rooted in a political economy that undermines the role of women and their participation in decision-making, women disproportionality bear the weight of unpaid and informal work without sufficient protection from the existing social protection schemes. The available programs poorly target the needs, ignore the gendered aspects of poverty and of caregiving, and are ultimately underfunded now more than ever. This is especially the case for women in rural areas, refugee communities, and of low-income sectors, who face cycles of economic dependency and political invisibility.

The problem lies not only in access, but the structural design of the systems that have failed to include women. With political deadlock and collapsing public trust, there is more urgency towards institutionalizing gender equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Maddah, L. S., Al Achkar, W., & Neaimeh, A. (2025, June). [Rebuilding Lebanon: Strategies to address income disparities and foster social stability \(Policy Brief No. 82\)](#). Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

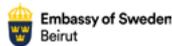
<sup>2</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. (2022). [Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations \(E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2022/TP.27\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> UN Women Lebanon. (2023, June). [The impact of Lebanon's financial crisis on women's economic empowerment \(Briefing Paper\)](#). UN Women.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank. (2023). Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) [Data set]. World Development Indicators.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). (2022). [Social protection in Lebanon: From a gender perspective](#).

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. (2022). [Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations \(E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2022/TP.27\)](#).



Within the framework of the Shifting Narratives project, funded by 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, a panel discussion addressing women's socio-economic inclusion in Lebanon took place to build on two years of ongoing work examining socio-economic and political empowerment of women in Lebanon. The session centered on structural, policy, and social barriers that hinder women's socio-economic participation. The discussion addressed the absence of inclusive social protection systems, gendered inequalities in labor markets, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. The session also focused on issues of discriminatory personal status laws, limited financial inclusion, and the lack of gender-responsive fiscal planning. These challenges were viewed within the circumstances of Lebanon's ongoing economic collapse, stalled governance, and deepening social fragmentation, which together aggravate women's socio-economic vulnerability and political invisibility.

Moderated by Director of the Asfari Institute, Lina Abou Habib, the panel featured Minister of Social Affairs, Haneen Al Sayed, President of Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan, Lamia Moubayed, and Director of Seeds for Legal Initiatives and Attorney at Law Loyal Sakr, each presenting insights from governmental, policy, and civil society perspectives. Panelists explored the socio-economic challenges encountered by women, discussing their implications and offering recommendations for reform.

# Challenges:

## 1. **Structural and Legal Barriers to Gender Equality**

The absence of a unified civil code that governs personal status matters reinforces Lebanon's deeply patriarchal and fragmented legal framework. Women's inability to pass their nationality to children, along with laws related to marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance being governed by religious sects, has direct implications on access to education, healthcare, and legal identity. This exacerbates domestic violence, abuse, and workplace discrimination.<sup>7</sup> This framework also entrenches unequal gender roles within the household, where women's disproportionately borne unpaid care work is not recognized as labor and therefore receives no legal or financial protection. As a result, women remain more vulnerable to domestic violence, abuse, and workplace discrimination, with their economic contributions rendered invisible by law and custom.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. **Gaps in the National Social Protection System**

With a weak and exclusionary social protection system, women in informal work are excluded from safety nets. Lebanon's social protection system remains fragmented, with benefits dispersed through clientelistic networks rather than a unified system, effectively excluding informal and refugee workers who lack such connections.<sup>9</sup> This is exacerbated for refugee women who face even more severe barriers. Programs by the Ministry of Social Affairs cover only about 20% of the population and are widely seen as poorly targeted and inadequate. This results in women being disproportionately left out of assistance, especially in times of crisis.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, spending remains heavily skewed toward public sector pensioners and subsidies,<sup>11</sup> with only a small fraction reaching the most vulnerable and poor women in informal employment are disproportionately left unprotected.

## 3. **Gendered Barriers to Credit, Work, and Economic Independence**

Women are underrepresented in Lebanon's formal labor market despite their significant contributions. Access to microfinance opportunities and programs is limited, and when available, they are often unaccompanied by essential tools such as financial literacy training, which leaves many vulnerable to debt or exploitation.

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<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2018, October 3). [Lebanon: Discriminatory nationality law: Grant Lebanese women's children, spouses citizenship rights](#). Human Rights Watch.

<sup>8</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). (2022, July). [Empowering women in the Arab region: Advancing the care economy—Case study: Childcare in Lebanon \(E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2022/TP.2\) \[Case study\]](#). United Nations.

<sup>9</sup> Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). (2021). [Social protection in Lebanon: From a system based on privileges to a rights-based system](#). ANND.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). (2022). [Social protection in Lebanon: From a gender perspective](#).

<sup>11</sup> Institute of Finance Basil Fuleihan. (2016). [Social protection in Lebanon: A mapping exercise](#). Ministry of Finance, Republic of Lebanon.

Despite evidence that women in Lebanon are more likely than men to repay loans, they face barriers such as the requirement for finding a loan guarantor or collateral,<sup>12</sup> which most lack due to limited financial power, unequal inheritance rights, and limited property ownership. These restrictions prevent women from securing credit to start businesses or achieve economic independence.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, while bearing the brunt of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities, “invisible work” acts as a barrier to economic participation, most significantly in rural areas that are typically hit harder by the economic collapse. This unrecognized care burden further compounds women’s exclusion from financial systems and the formal labor market, leaving them trapped between financial exclusion and household dependence. With an increase in caregiving demands and a decrease in state services continuing to shrink, women get stuck in vicious cycles of dependence.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. **Political Underrepresentation in Key Government Institutions**

Women remain marginalized in Lebanon’s political sphere despite being active in civil society and advocacy efforts. They rarely have the opportunity to present at decision-making tables or within formal institutions and find themselves being hostages of stalled or selective political agendas and victims of structural exclusion. The presence of women in ministerial and/or administrative leadership positions remains close to minimal. More so, the limited political will on inclusive governance and progress on gender equality remains a large barrier, whereby meaningful efforts to address patriarchal and exclusionary policies, laws, or practices are absent.

#### 5. **Lack of Comprehensive and Up-to-Date Gender Disaggregated Data**

Lack of gender-disaggregated data is a major obstacle in Lebanon when it comes to gender-responsive planning. Care work, informal labor, and economic contributions are not measured well, if at all. With poor data, the ability of policymakers and donors to assess needs, allocate resources, or track progress is limited, leading to weak accountability and hindering advocacy and reform efforts. Lebanon’s institutional capacity is further undermined by the fact that the last full national census was conducted in 1932,<sup>15</sup> meaning demographic and economic figures have not been systematically updated across decades. This lack of a recent baseline data source exacerbates data gaps on gender, particularly in areas like care work and informal employment, leaving women’s realities largely invisible in policymaking.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dailey, J. (2015). [Strengthening Lebanon’s Economy by Supporting Women Entrepreneurs](#). InfoPro.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson Center. (2023). [Women entrepreneurship in MENA: The cases of Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia \(Women Entrepreneurship in MENA Working Paper\)](#). Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

<sup>14</sup> Dagher, L., Nassar, F. N., & Sidani, O. (2025). From margins to mainstream: pathways to resilience and reform in Lebanon’s urban informal sector. *Third World Quarterly*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2516822>

<sup>15</sup> Maktabi, R. (1999). The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. *Who Are the Lebanese?* *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 26(2):219-241. DOI:[10.1080/13530199908705684](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530199908705684)

<sup>16</sup> Enmaeya News. (2025, June 18). [New Gender Handbook reveals Lebanon’s inequality, calls for data reform](#). Enmaeya.

# IMPLICATIONS

## 1. **The lack of gender-responsive social protection systems entrenches women's economic vulnerability**

Women from low-income, rural, and informal sectors in Lebanon have limited access to sufficient social protection. With policies that fail to address gender-specific needs, women end up excluded from safety nets. Without social insurance, maternity leave, and childcare, women are forced into informal, unstable labor or unpaid care work, leading to limited economic mobility and the reinforcement of cycles of poverty.

## 2. **Unpaid care work and emotional labor disproportionately constrain women's participation in the labor market**

The majority of domestic work, childcare, and elder care is carried by women (be it Lebanese or women migrant domestic workers or refugees), with heavy burdens that restrict them from formal employment opportunities and in turn economic advancement. With a lack of care infrastructure, such as affordable childcare services and eldercare facilities, and limited public investment into it, women are excluded from the workforce, unable to take full-time jobs. This leads to a reduction of both income and autonomy.

## 3. **Barriers to financial inclusion undermine women's economic independence**

With limited access to credit, loans, and microfinance, women face more barriers to financial independence and a lack of accompanying literacy trainings and legal protections; women are left vulnerable to exploitation and debt. This prevents them from building businesses, investing, and achieving financial independence. The result is a vicious cycle where women's economic potential is stifled, their autonomy undermined, and their contributions rendered invisible in Lebanon's broader economic recovery. The consequences extend beyond that, as excluding half the population from financial systems and formal labor markets stifles innovation, reduces entrepreneurial activity, curtails overall economic growth, and further burdens women with unpaid care labor without recognition.

## 4. **The absence of gender-disaggregated data obscures the scale of women's economic contributions and needs**

Limited data on care work and informal labor undermines women's role in the economy and limits policymakers' ability to target women's exclusion. Because available data is often outdated or incomplete, it has not been possible to design targeted interventions for women and other vulnerable groups without duplication of efforts.<sup>17</sup> This sets back advocacy efforts and accountability, keeping women invisible in planning and resource allocation.

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<sup>17</sup> UN Women. (n.d.). [Country fact sheet: Lebanon \[Data set\]. UN Women Data Hub.](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. **Expand and Reform Social Protection to Ensure Inclusive Coverage for Women and Vulnerable Groups**

It is imperative that Lebanon's social protection system is reformed to include universal and inclusive provisions, especially for women. This would mean a significant increase in the Ministry of Social Affairs' budget, alongside reforms to ensure funding is not being allocated to outdated and fragmented structures. A new system would be transparent, dynamic, and crisis-responsive with consistent monitoring to ensure problems are addressed and the right beneficiaries are served. With an increased budget alongside the necessary reforms, initiatives could be scaled up, made more effective, and better tailored to women's needs.

### 2. **Support Women's Economic Empowerment through Employment, Finance, and Care Services**

Expanding women's access to formal employment and integrating financial literacy as well as microfinance initiatives is necessary because they are considered to be the main tools of empowerment and battle exploitation. Women would be actively included in the economic recovery strategy, while vulnerable women, including single heads of households, can be supported through home-based work models as well as targeted entrepreneurship schemes. Lastly, affordable childcare and eldercare services are imperative for enabling women's sustainable participation in the workforce.

### 3. **Recognize Unpaid Care Work**

Recognition of unpaid carework, as well as measurement and acknowledgement through statistics and planning, is imperative and can be done through licensing and regulating home care services. This recognition must begin with systematic measurement through gender-disaggregated data, time-use surveys, and inclusion of unpaid care in national accounts. This could ensure the scale of women's work is acknowledged in planning and resource allocation. Beyond measurement, policy instruments should be used to reduce the burden on women and redistribute care responsibilities. This includes licensing and regulating home- and community-based care services, establishing affordable and accessible childcare and eldercare facilities, and integrating care provisions into labor law and social protection frameworks.

### 4. **Reform Personal Status, Nationality, and Labor Laws to Promote Gender Equality**

Legal reforms have been long overdue and necessary for dismantling the existing patriarchal structures in law. This includes allowing women to pass on nationality to their children, the introduction of civil law marriages to guarantee rights outside sectarian systems and the reformation of labor laws towards providing protections against exploitation and discrimination. Personal status laws remain one of the most significant barriers to women's economic participation, as many women still require approval from male guardians to access education, employment, or mobility.

Lebanon's current labor law also embeds discrimination in which women face restrictions on working in certain sectors, protections for maternity remain limited, and there are no provisions recognizing or supporting care responsibilities.

One of the most recent reform efforts has come through Minister of Labor Inaya Ezzeddine, who proposed amendments to introduce more flexible work arrangements and childcare provisions into the labor law.<sup>18</sup> Although these reforms have yet to be enacted, they mark an important precedent for addressing women's care burdens and expanding opportunities for participation. Lastly, legal safeguards must be enforceable with accessible justice systems.

## 5. **Advance Women's Political Participation to Ensure Equal Representation in Decision-Making**

Necessary political reforms must take into consideration women's presence and influence in governance structures, including gender quotas and strengthening women's leadership. This is imperative for targeting gender specific needs through representative decision-making. During Phase 1 of the "Shifting Narratives Project" in 2024, one of the milestones focused on women's political participation. We emphasized the need for evidence-based policy-making, accountability, and addressing financial and social barriers to women's political participation, with the aims of nurturing a more inclusive governance environment and promoting gender equality. These reforms would enable policies that address gender-specific needs, eradicate barriers, and foster conditions for women's better socio-economic participation.

## 6. **Enhance Data and Transparency for Inclusive Planning and Accountability**

In order to improve program effectiveness and rebuild trust with both donors and citizens, it is necessary to prioritize the collection and use of gender-disaggregated data, especially in care work and informal labor. This data allows policymakers to identify where women are excluded, how resources are distributed, and what gaps persist in access to services. Moreover, it is imperative to integrate them into social protection and planning, as well as making budget allocations public and trackable to ensure accountability, reduce leakages, and strengthen citizen confidence in state institutions.

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. (2023). [ESCWA and the Women and Children Parliamentary Committee launch a study on flexible work arrangements in Lebanon](#). United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

## CONCLUSION

Removing legal, structural, and economic barriers to women's participation is imperative for Lebanon's recovery. Discriminatory laws, lack of care infrastructure, and weak gender responsive planning perpetuate women's exclusion, especially for rural, refugee, and low-income women. For that, urgent reforms are required, some of which include expanding and funding inclusive social protection, ensuring equal legal rights, integrating women into decision-making bodies, and investing in childcare, eldercare, and financial empowerment programs. Through this, Lebanon can shift from viewing women as passive recipients of aid towards distinguishing them as indispensable leaders in economic recovery, social cohesion, and inclusive governance, which lays the groundwork for a more equal and resilient future for everyone.



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