Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the condition of women as political agents in Lebanon in the context of legislation and political participation. It focuses on the effect of the Civil War on women’s conditions of living in Lebanon, and their lives in the post-war period. War had negative effects on women, reinforcing their patriarchal subjugation, furthering their economic deprivation, and diverting attention from issues like women’s rights, which have only added to women’s political and social marginalization. The war also had a positive effect on women as it opened up new avenues for them to participate in public life. This paper analyzes gender relations in Lebanon through the frameworks of social change and the rise of civil society, but also emphasizes the challenges facing women in post-war Lebanon, where they are still governed by patriarchal values that hinder their political participation and their identification as full citizens.

I. Introduction

Women in Lebanon are often perceived as enjoying a better status than their sisters in other Arab countries, whether economically, socially or politically. While women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive, women in Lebanon have no such legal restrictions. While women in Kuwait have only acquired the right to vote relatively recently, Lebanese women attained the right to vote in 1952. Women in Lebanon are allowed to own businesses, and since 1988 they have been admitted into the Lebanese army. Since 1974, married Lebanese women no longer need the permission of the husband to travel abroad or to obtain a passport. And the number of Lebanese women seeking higher education matches that of men. More women in Lebanon are forming part of the workforce. Females constituted 18.4% of workers in 1975; this figure jumped to 27.2% in 1995, and 29% in 2007. All those issues contribute to painting a rosy picture of the condition of women in Lebanon. The Lebanese media play a part in sustaining this image, with a number

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3 Ibid.

of prominent female journalists like Maguy Farah, Giselle Khoury and Mai Chidyac playing an active on-screen role in televised political debate programs.

However, behind this glossy façade lies a patriarchal legislative, social and political system where women do not enjoy an equal status to men. A UNICEF report on the condition of women in Lebanon in 1995 concluded that:

Women are usually excluded and marginalized at various levels including: a) discrimination against women in... existing laws. b) in norms, habits, traditions and social culture. c) political discrimination especially... in the real participation in political leadership and decision making positions at all levels. d) economic discrimination regarding attaining production resources, type of jobs, salaries and... participation in the economic process. e) statistical discrimination where there is a need for specific information on women.⁵

Those problems identified in 1995 continue to be relevant today. Women are still discriminated against in Lebanese law, and their political participation remains minimal. Although Lebanese law does not discriminate against women regarding political participation and voting, women’s involvement in politics in Lebanon is marginalized. The first female to gain a parliamentary seat was Mirma Boustany in 1963, but she only gained that seat after the death of her father, whom she was elected to replace. Until 2005, there were no females in the Lebanese cabinet (when Leila Solh Hamadeh, Wafaa’ Diqa Hamzeh and Nayla Moawad were appointed Minister of Industry, Minister of State and Minister of Social Affairs, respectively), while the subsequent cabinet, appointed in 2008, contained only one woman: Bahia Hariri as Minister of Education. The number of women in the Lebanese parliament after the 2005 parliamentary elections was the highest in Lebanon’s history, but remained very low. As Ekmekji points out, ‘[i]n the 2005 legislative elections, only six women out of the 128 members made it to parliament (4.7 percent), thus ranking Lebanon 125th (out of 138) on the IPU list’.⁶

On the social level, Lebanese women remain governed by what Suad Joseph calls the ‘kin contract’, which she says hinders the positioning of women as full citizens. She argues that rather than looking at the sexual contract (between husbands and wives) as the main constraint on women’s position in Lebanese society, one needs to focus on:

... extended kin relationships. Rather than vulnerability by marriage, I focus on vulnerability by ‘birth’. Rather than the sexual contract, I focus on the ‘kin contract’. It is the mobilization of patriarchal extended kinship, as a venue of social control, and the state’s mobilization of religion to sanctify extended kinship that has been the most significant deterrent to citizenship equality for women in Lebanon.⁷

This paper seeks to tease out the complexities underlying Joseph’s above statement in arguing that one cannot examine the position of women as citizens and political agents in Lebanon without linking it to the wider social processes within which women exist.

II. Lebanese Women and Personal Status Laws

Charlton, Everett and Staudt divide policies regarding women into three categories. Waylen explains that those categories are: (1) ‘policies which are aimed particularly at women’; (2) ‘policies which deal with relations between men and women’; and (3) ‘general policies’, which are ‘supposedly gender neutral but have a different impact on men and women. These can be further subdivided into those policy areas linked to the public sphere and somehow seen as “masculine”, such as state-defined politics, war, foreign policy, [and] international trade’.

Women in Lebanon are subject to inequality in all three categories. But while in the last category, the inequality is indirect – because the policies themselves do not discriminate against women, but the social frameworks within which they exist do – the first two categories see direct discrimination.

Lebanon is a democratic state where the constitution grants all its citizens equal rights. Article 7 of the Lebanese constitution asserts that ‘all Lebanese are equal under the law, they enjoy equality in civil and political rights and they assume duties and responsibilities without any difference between them’. It should be noted, however, that no article or clause explicitly prohibits gender discrimination. The paradox in Lebanese law is that gender discrimination is in fact institutionalized. ‘While the civil code grants equality for all its citizens, the Personal Status Laws, which regulate gender relationships, contradict all the basic legal principles of equality and non-discrimination’. This applies to two main areas: citizenship, and family status laws. The late Laure Moghaizel, one of Lebanon’s most prominent campaigners for women’s and human rights, summarized the first area as follows: ‘In Lebanon, children only inherit their father’s nationality. A mother can only pass her Lebanese nationality to her children in two cases: if the child is illegitimate and she recognizes him before the father, and if she is a foreigner and after the death of the husband, who is also a foreigner, she takes on Lebanese nationality’.

Family status laws on the other hand are governed by the religious authorities, as opposed to the civil state. Lebanon is constituted of 18 recognized sects divided among three religious groups: Muslim, Christian and Druze. Laws governing issues like marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody are dependent on the rulings of the different sects within each religious group. So, for example, not only do Christian women enjoy different rights from Muslim women; Muslim Shi’ite and Muslim Sunni women also follow different laws. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig summarizes the situation:

A Christian woman divorced because of adultery is not entitled to remarry. Child custody laws favor the Muslim father and the patrilineal family in general, with divorced Shi’ite mothers having custody of their children for a shorter period than Sunni mothers. In the area of inheritance, Lebanese Muslim women, unlike their Christian counterparts who get an equal share, inherit half what their brothers inherit in case one or both parents are dead. Not only is the above list of discriminatory practices in family status laws far from exhaustive, discrimination varies in intensity according to the confession of the woman.13

The Lebanese government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997; however, it only did this after expressing reservations dealing with Personal Status Laws. In particular, the government expressed reservations about Articles 9 (2), 16(1) (c) (d) (f) (g) and 29 (1), dealing with nationality, marriage rights, divorce rights, child custody, parenting, and the ‘same personal rights as husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation’.14 In this sense, the above areas of discrimination against women in Lebanese law have been maintained. As Naciri and Nusair argue, ‘[t]hese reservations not only render CEDAW ... ineffective, they also de facto preclude any future or further discussion on how to improve the various existing international human rights and women’s rights conventions’.15

III. The Personal is the Political

Why should personal status laws matter in the context of women’s political participation in Lebanon? One of the most known statements of second-wave feminism is ‘the personal is the political’. Second-wave feminists argued that far from existing outside the realm of politics, issues seen as belonging to the private sphere of women’s lives and bodies should form part of the public debate. As Phillips states, one of the achievements of the women’s movement in general is stressing how ‘[t]hings that used to be dismissed as trivial can no longer be viewed as the haphazard consequence of individual choice, for they are structured by relations of power. Things once shrouded in the secrecy of private existence are and should be of public concern’.16 However, in the case of Lebanese women, the relationship between personal status laws, citizenship and political participation is a more concrete one. Naciri and Nusair argue that Personal Status Laws ‘govern what typically is seen as belonging to the private sphere – marriage, divorce, maintenance, child custody and inheritance – but has [sic] an equal effect on women’s public lives, acting as a potent control mechanism over women’s economic, political, social, civic and cultural activities’.17

First, the inability of women to pass on citizenship to their husbands and children constitutes them as markers of social and national boundaries. As Waylen puts it, citing Deniz Kandiyoti (1991), the ‘identification of women as bearers of cultural identity and boundary markers will have a negative effect on their

15 Ibid., p. 30.
17 Naciri and Nusair, p. 5.
emergence as full-fledged citizens’. How can a woman be a full citizen if she does not possess the same citizenship rights as men? Second, women’s inequality within the law sits uncomfortably within a supposedly democratic system. As Philips argues, ‘[d]emocracy implies equality but, when it is superimposed on an unequal society, it allows some people to count for more than others’. Lebanese law has sustained the social inequalities that existed before the birth of the Lebanese state. By institutionalizing them, it has relegated women to a secondary level of citizenship. Third, the way different Personal Status Laws apply to different women from different sects means that ‘not only are Lebanese women discriminated against vis-à-vis Lebanese men in general, they are not even equal among themselves according to Lebanese personal status laws’. This begs the question of who is a Lebanese woman, but also, who is a Lebanese citizen?

This brings us to the final point, that this discrimination against women highlights their powerlessness in the nationalist project. Wilford complicates Benedict Anderson’s characterization of the nation as an imagined community by posing the questions ‘Who, exactly, does the imagining?’ and ‘What roles are assigned to women in the nationalist project?’ In the case of Lebanon, it is clear that the Lebanese nation is one determined by men, where women are either relegated to the margins (their needs being regarded as less important than men’s as demonstrated in the Personal Status Laws), or not paid attention to (as seen in the gender-neutral language used in the Lebanese constitution). This construction of a ‘non-gendered, abstract citizenship’ stems from the long traditions of political theory that ‘operate to center the male’. Phillips critiques political theory by saying that ‘[w]ith the odd exception, the entire debate on democracy has proceeded for centuries as if women were not there’. Political theory ‘writers seemed to take women’s unworthiness so much for granted that they did not even notice they were leaving them out’, but this male centrism remains when women are taken into consideration. The controls over women in Personal Status Laws emphasize identity as physically embodied rather than abstract. It is through this embodiment that men’s and women’s different experiences of power are highlighted:

Our discussions of sexual equality have always silently privileged this male body. When men and women are treated the same, it means women are treated as if they were men; when men and women are treated differently, the man is the norm, against which the woman is peculiar, lacking and different.

Hatem argues that Western modernization theories initially also constituted a gender divide. Therefore, when such theories were adopted in the Middle East as

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24 Ibid., p. 2.
25 Ibid., p. 3.
26 Ibid., p. 37, my emphasis.
states formed, they accommodated ‘the asymmetrical definitions of gender roles and relations within the family’. The emerging modern systems in the Middle East were inherently patriarchal and,

combined new public roles for women with the culturally specific concepts of male leadership (Quwamma) over women, the assumption of women’s diminished mental and religious capacity (Naqisat ‘Aql wa Din) in comparison to men (and hence their exclusion from key religious, judicial, and political positions), and finally a female familial obligation to obey (ta’at) men. This did not represent a form of distorted modernization... Western modernization did not begin by extending the principles of liberty and equality to women.

So, in addition to sustaining traditional forms of social and religious forms of discrimination against women, what is seen in the Middle East, and Lebanon is no exception, is an uncritical adoption of Western modernization.

Having highlighted the links between the legal, social and political structures that govern women in Lebanon, the paper will now proceed to unearthing the barriers facing Lebanese women in being full citizens and political agents. Those barriers are both practical resulting from historical particularities, and conceptual.

IV. Citizenship and the Public/Private Paradox

Referring to second-wave feminists, Anne Phillips argues that the ‘public and private cannot be dealt with as separate worlds, as if the one exists in a rhythm independent from the other...it is a nonsense to think of the “personal” as something outside of politics, or to conceive of politics as immune to sexuality and “private” concerns’. However, in Lebanon there is a paradox in the relationship between the private and the public. On the one hand, Lebanese politics is conceived of as a public arena that is more hospitable to men. This is in line with patriarchal notions of the public sphere, where, by default, women are relegated to the ‘private’ arena of the home. By extension, because politics is identified with a male public sphere, democracy itself becomes associated with men. This is reinforced in the historical tales about the formation of the independent Lebanese republic, which name a number of prominent men (such as Bshara al-Khoury and Riad al-Solh, the independent republic’s first president and prime minister), but ignore women completely. As such, any role played by women is absent from the dominant historical discourse.

On the other hand, the women’s movement in Lebanon since the Civil War has largely concerned itself with ‘private’ issues. A significant proportion of Lebanese women take part in running and joining women’s groups, but the activities of those groups remain limited to what is seen as the private realm. Women’s groups seem largely unwilling to engage in activities that go beyond their primary focus on charity and social welfare. Very few groups are engaged with women’s and human rights, and there are none that specifically aim at political reform. Rana Issa, an activist for women’s rights in Lebanon, expressed her frustration at attempting to

28 Ibid.
raise the issue of sectarianism within a women’s group she wanted to work with in Lebanon. The group, CRTDA, was formed to lobby for women’s citizenship rights in Lebanon:

I found it odd that they shied away from engaging in any political discussions. They said they only wanted to deal with gender issues and leave the politics to the politicians... The irony is the issue they chose to work on was citizenship, a core political issue. Deciding who is a citizen in a democratic system is a crucial and most basic element in the democratic process. So, I pushed on and suggested that we deal with sectarianism because in my opinion sectarian representation in Lebanon is one of the major reasons why women cannot pass on their citizenship to their children. But sectarianism is a taboo topic to discuss, plus... feminism is not political in their eyes: it is after all limited to abortion, wife beating, your right to work and dress the way you like, marry who you like and be like those Western women we admire so much who give their citizenships to their partners and children.31

T.S. Marshall famously stated that citizenship is a ‘status bestowed on those who are full members of a community generally the nation state. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed’.32 However, ‘[b]ecause the nation is often constructed by elites who have the power to define the nation in ways that further their own interests, the same elites are also able to define who is central and who is marginal to the national project’.33 The problem of the women’s movement identified above is that by drawing a line between ‘the private’ and ‘the public’, the ‘private sphere is... deemed politically irrelevant’,34 which means that the groups involuntarily sustain the disregard of women as political agents. This further serves to ‘secure a version of the individual [in politics] that remains resolutely male’.35 In this sense, citizenship itself becomes male, even if it is expressed in gender-neutral terms in the Lebanese constitution.

V. Sustained Political Patriarchy

What the above context means in a practical sense is that politics in Lebanon is conceived of within a patriarchal framework. This framework has hindered women’s participation as electoral candidates.36 One result of the framework is the lack of recognition of the ability of women to be politicians. Schulze points out that the three women elected into Lebanese parliament in 1992 only managed to acquire those positions through their familial connections to men: a brother in the cases of Bahia Hariri and Maha Khoury; and an assassinated husband in the case of Nayla Moawad. As she puts it, ‘all three women can be seen as an extension of the politics of a male family member’37 rather than politicians in their own rights. Nayla Moawad herself acknowledged this: ‘Carrying my husband’s name has

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31 Rana Issa, Interview with the author, November 2, 2007.
given my voice an added weight. I have not had to start from scratch to prove myself. For two years, I was the only woman in parliament.38

In the parliamentary election of 2005, those women (except for Maha Khoury, who was not re-elected) were joined by Solange Gemayel, the widow of the assassinated president Bachir Gemayel, and Sitrida Geagea, the wife of the then imprisoned leader of the Lebanese Forces, Samir Geagea. Both women seemed to stand for men for whom running for the elections was impossible. Another elected woman was Gilberte Zouain, daughter of ex-minister and legislator Maurice Zouain. The only non-kin affiliated woman in the Lebanese parliament formed in 2005 was Ghinwa Jalloul, but even she was elected on the basis of her being a member of the parliamentary ‘list’ affiliated with former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and his supporters. It is questionable whether she would have been able to succeed had she run as an independent candidate. To do so would have meant overcoming a number of hurdles: ‘any female [in Lebanon] seeking greater political involvement, particularly on the national level, has to overcome the obstacles of religion, family patronage and gender’.39 Schulze’s observation has been reflected in the 2006 UN report on the implementation of CEDAW in Lebanon, which states that ‘[t]he continuing active influence of traditional factors (family allegiance, services, client networks, family or partisan political legacy) in determining the chances of women’s success is clear’.40

The other problem faced by any woman who might want to run for elections in Lebanon is one of attitudes. As Peterson and Runyan argue, ‘negative attitudes toward women’s political participation are expressed as lack of confidence in and support for female candidates and politicians’,41 in other words, the unacceptability of women as political agents. Moreover, ‘the underrepresentation of women in political office is often “explained” by the stereotype of their being uninterested in power and politics’.42 Unfortunately, the focus of Lebanese women’s groups on activities detached from politics only serves to sustain this stereotype.

This stereotype is held by both men and women, who pass them on to future generations through socialization. Peterson and Runyan explain: ‘socialization into appropriate “masculine” behavior makes men more likely than women to identify with political activities. Just as important, gender stereotypes . . . create a “climate” that encourages male participation while discouraging female participation in politics’.43 The low number of women in parliament therefore ‘not only indicates the reluctance of the patriarchal society to accept females as politically equal, but also suggests the reluctance of women to demand such equality’.44 This is again reflected in the CEDAW UN report in its reference to the lower number of female candidates in the 2005 elections (18 candidates) than in the 2000 elections (14 candidates): ‘This reduction in the number of female candidates may be attributable to the conviction among women of the futility of

42 Ibid., p. 22.
43 Ibid., p. 60.
standing as a candidate’. It is telling that the female members of parliament in Lebanon are largely unconcerned with pushing for a change in Personal Status Laws or for implementing legislation against gender discrimination. The same applies to female Cabinet members. For example, despite several good initiatives by the Ministry of Social Affairs (headed by a woman, Nayla Moawad, from 2005 until 2008), such as reproductive health programs for women, few are aimed at women as *women* (as opposed to them as mothers). The only exception is member of parliament Ghinwa Jalloul who tried to start a public debate about women’s citizenship rights and to raise this issue in parliament, but her calls fell on deaf ears.

In this sense, it is the women themselves who take part in sustaining patriarchy. This is not helped by the characterization of femininity as ‘different’ by a number of prominent female public figures in Lebanon,

For example, Sitt Rabab [al-Sadr, sister of the Shiite Imam and leader Musa al-Sadr], in looking at the changing role of women in the Shi’a community, has voiced concern that women may become ‘too harsh’. Her view on male-female relations reveals some of the barriers women still face: ‘It may be very easy to dispute and argue with her husband, but is much braver and stronger to bear him silently’.46

Athias and Yuval Davis argue that while ‘femininity may be seen as a coping mechanism’, this strategy also means that ‘women can be both individually and collectively active agents in their own subordination’.47 What we have then is a situation where women have internalized ‘oppressive stereotypes’,48 and are reinforcing, rather than challenging, gender inequalities.49

VI. The Effect of the Civil War and Subsequent Conflict

Another reason behind Ghinwa Jalloul’s failure in her attempt to raise awareness about and call for a change in nationality laws is that her campaign overlapped with the 33-day war between Hizbullah and Israel in July 2006. Earlier that Spring, a number of events had taken place as part of this campaign. The Women’s Rights Clubs at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University had staged public debates and workshops about the issue. They also led awareness campaigns on the street, and even disseminated merchandizing (in the form of posters and handbags) displaying the phrase: ‘My nationality: a right for me and my family’. But as the pace of the war quickened and the scale of destruction widened, the campaign was ground to a halt as the country was overtaken by more pressing concerns. As the air, road and sea routes leading into Lebanon were blocked, there was fear of a shortage of food and medical supplies. Maksoud’s comments on the situation of women during the Civil War apply to the July 2006 war too:

When abstract concerns such as feminism persist in the consciousness of a society at war, the level of purpose in the debate has diminished, because to have a purpose beyond survival becomes in the minds of people a factor interrupting their quest for

46 Ibid., p. 162.
49 Ibid.
self-preservation. In such an atmosphere, there invariably develops a diminishing of political and social consciousness, which is what happened in Lebanon.50

In this way, the July 2006 war’s negative impact on the nationality campaign mirrors a much larger one in the days of the Civil War that ravished Lebanon from 1975 until the early nineties. The Civil War was an economic, political and social disaster, during which the actions of women’s movements geared towards women’s rights were largely suspended.51 The Civil War contributed to the channelling of the energies of the members of those groups towards providing more ‘essential’ needs. Over a decade and a half, this trend further reinforced the association of women with an ethics of care.

However, some scholars believe that the Civil War had a positive effect on women. Nauphal for example argues that ‘the war has opened new avenues for women by redefining their role and increased their involvement in public life’.52 This position is mainly based on the fact that the Civil War increased the number of women working outside the home. The deterioration in the economic situation during the Civil War, coupled with the absence of men who had either joined the war as militiamen or emigrated, meant that there was an increase in women’s economic involvement. Nauphal explains, ‘Women’s survival strategies in this context included selling assets such as gold and land..., transforming their domestic skills into marketable ones, and in the worse cases, resorting to socially unacceptable jobs such as prostitution’.53 A survey conducted by UNFPA in 1992 showed that the percentage of households headed by females stood at 20%, having risen from 9.2% before the Civil War.54

The increased visibility of women in the work sphere also had an impact on the way women’s groups in Lebanon conceived their campaigns. The UNFPA report says that the women’s movement in Lebanon is basing its campaigns on the premise that economic independence will lead to emancipation.55 Hala Maksoud says that this is typical of feminist literature in general:

Feminist literature on the subject adopted this paradigm and drew on later experiences of women’s involvement ... to argue that women, through their struggle in wars of liberation, liberate not only themselves but also their male oppressors from their chauvinism ... Although that literature was developed with particular reference to wars of liberation, it was later applied to all wars, on the assumption that war opens up opportunities for women, which, if properly used, are bound to lead to their empowerment.56

But working outside the home does not bring automatic freedom. One burden is that work was not coupled with a change in perceptions of women’s roles. As Peterson and Runyan57 argue, women who work outside the home had to negotiate an added workload when they arrived home as they were still expected

53 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
57 Peterson and Runyan (1993).
to be responsible for most, if not all, household chores. Added to this is the fact that the destruction of the infrastructure during the war increased the time women spent on daily chores.\textsuperscript{58} Another hurdle is that although women’s presence outside the home was tolerated, even encouraged, they were still expected to observe the same social mores that applied to them before. The association of women with family honour for example has meant that female workers have had to be aware of this link when conducting their economic affairs, namely in their relationships with men in the workplace.

Orloff mentions another hurdle, this time a conceptual one. He argues: ‘just as the independent male householder serves as the ideal-typical citizen in classical liberal democratic theory, the male worker serves as the ideal-typical citizen in the literature on social rights’.\textsuperscript{59} The increased presence of women in the workplace carried some positive changes in laws governing women’s rights (the right of married women to own a business for example was changed in 1994 to lift the restriction of needing the husband’s permission). However, it did not carry a change in the way women were conceived as citizens, neither socially nor politically.

The Civil War also saw women engaging in conflict, but not in decision-making processes about this conflict. Julinda Abu Nassr argues:

Women had no say over when the war started, neither in the decision making processes, nor in the efforts to achieve reconciliation. Their roles were those of the recipients of the consequences and the outcomes of the war on the one hand, and the makers and manufacturers of the laws of survival on the other hand.\textsuperscript{60}

But Nauphal presents an alternative view, saying that ‘[d]espite the fact that they were absent from decision-making as military and political actors, many women performed war-related tasks and provided essential support for militiamen. Thus, their involvement was through ‘active resistance’.\textsuperscript{61} Nauphal’s notion of ‘active resistance’ is nevertheless romantic. The number of women who joined the militias was not substantial, and amongst those that did, most had roles that were limited to those of nurture and care, such as making and delivering food to the male fighters and caring after the wounded. Moreover, women’s contribution to the war was seen as momentary. Those women who had fought in the militias and taken more active roles retreated to assume traditional female roles after the war ended. None of the former militias or political groups in post-war Lebanon have any prominent female leaders. As Schulze puts it, ‘[s]ociety tolerated female “warriors” since they were perceived as temporary, often not being taken seriously by their male counterparts or those in politically important positions’.\textsuperscript{62}

Ekmekji cites a 2005 United Nations study on women and elections in post-conflict societies as noting that ‘since men are usually the warmongers, peace negotiations consequently further exclude women in post-war parliaments’.\textsuperscript{63} Men seem to ‘suffer a collective and convenient memory loss about the contribution

\textsuperscript{58} Maksoud (1996).
\textsuperscript{61} Nauphal (2001), p. 58.
\textsuperscript{62} Schulze, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{63} Ekmekji, p. 56.
made by women’. As Cynthia Enloe argues, “forgetting” ... appears to be a frequent effect of reconsolidating centralized control of authority ... [it] is part of the process of legitimatizing privilege, including gender privilege. The Civil War therefore, far from emancipating women, confirmed the character of the Lebanese society, state and public sphere as a ‘gendered hierarchy’.

At times women were able to use this gendered hierarchy to their benefit. According to Jean Said Makdissi, sometimes women were able to use the traditional respect given to them in Lebanese society to confront the militias during the war. But the overall effect of the war was a marginalization of women’s position as women. The Civil War resulted in the breakdown of the social order, and the reaction to what was an even stronger adherence to the family and tradition. The increased adherence to the family can be understood in the context of a society lacking an official protector, but it diverted attention from campaigning for women’s rights. This meant that during the war, women ‘were not organized as women around an agenda. In fact, the only organized women’s activities during the war were demonstrations and sit-ins against the war’, activities sanctioned by the traditional view of women as peace keepers.

VII. Religion and Sectarianism

What adds to the marginalization of women as political agents is the governance of political participation by codes derived from sectarian beliefs and practices. As Suad Joseph explains, ‘[p]olitical parties have not been so much sectarian in the sense of representing the interests of particular sects as a whole as they have been the personal followings of individual leaders (zu’ama’) rooted largely within specific sects and organized around highly personalized patron–client relationships’.

This creates a problem within Lebanon’s system of sectional representation, that citizens are not represented by those sharing their interests as citizens, but by those who are supposed to be representing the interests of wider communities that those citizens belong to. This transforms people from ‘citizens’ to ‘bearers of interest’. Kirsten Schulze explains how this status quo affects women’s political roles:

Arab society in general and Lebanese society in particular, has prided itself on male leadership though the za’im, the epitome of the ‘macho man’ (Accad 1994: 41). He embodies the perceived masculine values of conquest, domination, competition and war... Before the civil war, the za’im was the political and secular leader of his community. During the war he became its military leader along with a new, younger generation of militia leaders. Afterwards he resumed his traditional role, based on notions of political and social differentiation, class privilege, or class status. Thus, it can be seen

64 Wilford, p. 3.
66 Waylen, p. 8.
69 Maksoud, p. 94.
that he never relinquishes the control of his community, making it difficult even for women involved in combat to assume decision-making positions.\textsuperscript{73}

It is not only women who are affected by this situation. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, the Director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University, explains that

both Lebanese women and men in general lack political agency in a country where confessionalism and not party politics determine the parameters of political involvement. In other words, both genders suffer exclusion from political life in a political culture where parties with clear issue-oriented platforms basically do not exist, where clientelism and not meritocracy largely determine who has access to positions of power inside existing parties or in the larger political institutions of the country, and where one’s confessional identity is the single most important factor in determining one’s role in society and which ‘side’ (I find it difficult to use ‘political party’ in the Lebanese context) one belongs to.\textsuperscript{74}

The Civil War also reinforced sectarianism ‘and the division of the population along confessional lines. These phenomena have… thwarted the evolution of social integration. They have weakened civil institutions, which became polarized’.\textsuperscript{75} Large segments of the Lebanese population lived through the war segregated from communities from other sects. This long-term segregation resulted in the creation of negative myths about those unseen Others, and a sense of mistrust that persisted after the war ended. Lebanon today is still plagued by the traces of this sectarianism. Despite attempts during the Cedar Revolution of 2005 to foster a sense of national identity in Lebanon, the country remains a fragile one when it comes to its population’s national imagination. This imagination is almost non-existent, with quasi-tribal loyalties to the kin, the clan and the sectarian community remaining stronger than those towards the nation. This divisive atmosphere has an indirect effect on women (and men); how can women (or men) conceive of themselves as citizens of a nation when the notion of citizenship itself is being continuously contested by competing loyalties?

Another problem with sectarianism is that it reinforces religious notions of selfhood which can be discriminatory towards women. For example, the problem with Islam-based gender movements is that they are influenced by the concept of fairness rather than equality—the ‘fairness’ of respecting ‘the differences between and inherently complementary nature of men and women and their corresponding roles’—and thereby ‘maintain the power structure that oppresses women’.\textsuperscript{76}

This religious-based power structure merges with politics in Lebanon, creating a dogmatic effect on the political environment. Najla Hamadeh elaborates on this point and its wider implications:

When laws are supported and perpetrated by religious or political powers that cannot be questioned or cannot be held accountable or by the claim that the legislator is speaking in the name of such authority, the need to be convincing becomes trivial. Indeed, in such cases the general public may sense the futility of subjecting the laws to the scrutiny of reason and may learn to either accept the authoritarian legal system without discussion or
to ignore its shortcomings, focusing on ways to get around it. Such a public may even lose
the habit of rational scrutiny altogether.

Lebanon is a democracy and as such its laws are expected to be more likely to be amenable
to criticism and discussion and hence to be more rationally convincing. However, a high
proportion of Lebanese laws that tackle issues related to women suffer from contradiction
and weak argumentation. The Lebanese public, albeit democratic, is expected to accept
irrationality and injustice in its legal system not only because some rulings purport to be
backed up by the high authority of religion, but also because of certain ‘special’ conditions
that have nothing to do with the law or justice but with factors like tradition, precarious
multi-confessional coexistence or the necessity to give Palestinians no option other than
‘the right of return’.77

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has put forward the context necessitating the establishment of a civil
status law in Lebanon that is not gender-biased.78 It has linked this with the wider
political and social context in Lebanon. The chapter has argued that there is a need
to examine this context in detail to unearth the inequalities hidden beneath Lebanon’s seemingly benevolent image. For example, even though the percentage of female and male voters in Lebanon is similar,79 this paper has shown that voting per se ‘does not create space for transformation or change’.80 It has argued that there is a need instead to focus on changing the systems and perceptions that trap women into ‘a culture of passivity and self-denial’.81 Dima Dabbous-Sensenig argues that in Lebanon, women suffer from what Naomi Wolf calls a ‘fear of power’,82 where women are afraid to engage in politics.

One way of countering this fear has been a proposal put forward by Arda
Arsenian Ekmekji, the only female member of the newly appointed Commission
for a New Lebanese Electoral Law (appointed in August 2005 by the Lebanese
Cabinet), to implement a quota system that guarantees between 10 and 30%
of parliamentary seats for women as a temporary measure for the three rounds
of elections after the 2006 round (covering a period of 12 years).83 While
acknowledging the limitations of a quota system, Ekmekji defends the quota
measure in light of the limited participation of women in government in Lebanon.
In the 2006 report on CEDAW implementation, the United Nations published the
results of a survey on the adoption of a female quota, which stated that 46% of
those surveyed were in favour of some form of female quota.84 Adopting a quota is
reliant on the Lebanese Cabinet and the Parliament approving it; however, with
political instability continuing to plague Lebanon, the Lebanese government has
put the proposal on the back burner.85 Hala Maksoud argues,

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81 Ibid.
83 Ekmekji (2005/6).
85 After sectarian clashes erupted in Lebanon in May 2008, a new Lebanese cabinet was formed and approved
re-implementing the 1960 electoral law which does not accommodate gender-based quotas; however, lobbying
for a quota is still being pursued by the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform.
In light of the fact that most Arab countries live in a period of social transformation, with many experiencing wars and struggles for liberation, it is only natural that although realizing the necessity for social change and the importance of women’s issues, the political sphere overrides their concerns, and its immediacy often deflects from other pursuits. In such situations, women’s priorities cannot be the same as those of women living in peaceful, post-industrial societies.86

But even a quota system is not necessarily going to cause a major change in the political status quo. As Anne Phillips says, ‘most supporters of women’s equality cherish a belief that the changes they desire have as much a qualitative as a quantitative side. It is not just a matter of more women in politics; it is a chance of transforming the political realm’.87 Only by changing the social and cultural constraints that dominate the political realm in Lebanon and by overcoming the shackles of sectarianism and clientelism can the political sphere in Lebanon become a truly open one, where men and women can be full political agents and citizens.