Women's Political Participation in Lebanon's Local Government:

Towards an Alternative Mode of Politics

Contents

Executive Summary

Lebanon's local politics has been a site of emerging forms of civic activism in which women played a significant role. In the political field, this has opened up further space for women's local representation. In 2016, a civil society cum-political movement, Beirut Madinati performed impressively when it received over 30 percent of the vote in local elections. Beirut Madinati was not able to gain any seats in the municipal council due to Lebanon's winner-take-all system, yet its political success demonstrated that there was social demand for change. In this research, we analyse the experience of women in local government across Lebanon, illustrating our argument with the case Beirut Medinati, a movement that represents a type of politics with high potential for women's political participation.

Patriarchal norms, family dominance and sectarianism in local contexts

Lebanon's local electoral processes are entwined with patriarchal norms, family dominance and sectarianism. Especially in rural settings, families play a critical role throughout the electoral process, including in the nomination of candidates, the formation of electoral lists and campaigning. Depending on the size and sectarian composition of the area in question, two or three extended families tend to dominate decision-making structures. Since families are often linked by tribal loyalties, which intersect with sectarian allegiances, identifying the representative of the broader family interests depends on various factors. These include candidate background, access to resources, the ability to enhance the family's prestige and forge patron-client relations (not only with the community but also with patrons in the centre). Families tend to choose male members as their representatives. The gender preference is often a reflection of how the family would like to be represented to the outside world. Mayors need to be engaged in negotiations for resources with various actors, such as the central government, businesses and NGOs, which families often believe, requires male leadership.

Urban-rural dynamics

Urban/rural dynamics have a major influence on women's political participation in Lebanon. While families play a predominant role in rural settings, the situation in big cities is different. Here, local elections resemble national ones. Political parties assume a much greater role in determining the candidates and making up the electoral lists. They are heavily invested in the campaign process by providing money, teams and platforms.

The differences between elections in cities and rural areas present women with different challenges and opportunities. Small-scale politics provide a more favourable environment for women candidates. Since the candidate has already existing connections to the community (either she is known for her profession or because of her family), the campaigning does not require a lot of resources. Women in big cities often need to play the established political game in order to be nominated by the parties. This often involves being part of large networks of patronage and complying with established party lines. In a competitive environment dominated by parties, an independent campaign, especially by a woman, is highly difficult.

Patronage, access to resources and developmental activism

These patron-client dynamics pose significant challenges to women, whose access to resources remains limited. Those coming from big, wealthy families, may have resources to distribute. For most women, however, the way to overcome the resource challenge is to form civil society engagement. Lebanon's social sphere contains many NGOs. These NGOs employ women professionals and are located in large urban areas, providing a variety of services to Lebanese citizens. For many women, NGOs act as steppingstones for their political careers, shaping how politics is done in the country. NGO experience is a way for women to show that they can raise money. Working at NGOs can mean having connections to international development agencies and expert networks that can help to funnel money into municipal projects.

NGOs not only inject funds into the municipalities but also change the way politics is conducted. NGOs in Lebanon are deeply engaged in democracy and governance work, promoting liberal values, issue-based politics, active citizenship and female empowerment. Women who have transitioned to political life from NGOs are well versed in the language of policy and use it, particularly in local elections. They draft policy programmes and refrain from excessive promises, focusing on developmental targets concerning pollution, waste collection, transportation, accessibility, and recreational areas such as parks and libraries, and community centres. The growing influence of NGOs created space for "developmental activism" at the local level. Here, development is less about economic progress, and more a language that provides an alternative politics, one, that delineates acceptable forms of relationship between the state and citizen.

Campaigning, gender norms in office and male allies

Overall, men and women in local elections do not use significantly different campaign strategies, but there are some characteristics peculiar to female-led campaigns. In small towns and rural districts, campaigns tend to be more personal. In these areas, women candidates often find it easier to get into more intimate

domains of households, in which women often spend more time than men due to their traditional social roles. In urban centres, campaigning on the street level and social media is crucial. In the countryside, it is not enough to knock on doors, one has to enter them and spend time with voters. In the conservative outskirts of cities, too, women have the advantage of mobilizing women's groups. Easier access to women voters also helps female candidates to develop a better understanding of the needs of this voter block.

Women candidates also place a higher emphasis on the inclusion of youth in local politics, build links with community-led activist groups that have proliferated in urban settings, especially in Beirut. Given the importance of youth activist movements in the country's urban realm over the last decade, women candidates have been better at reflecting the changing social dynamics in their political programmes. Beirut Madinati's success in the 2016 elections was the most visible example of how youth movements have been energising citizen-centred politics at the local level. As well as the significance of mobilising youth, most female respondents also stressed the importance of male allyship. In a society where power is concentrated in the hands of men, finding male partners to support women in positions of power is particularly important. This is both the case for urban contexts, where women bring the expertise of their male networks into municipal work or in a small town, where more traditional male support, such as clerics, can open doors for women.

While important changes have taken place in Lebanese society concerning the role of family and authority, leading to a more favourable environment for women's political participation, the level of support women candidates receive from men is far from ideal.

Recommendations

- Identify women already in advocacy and build their political skills.
- Promote non-affiliated campaigns.
- Set up women counsellors' desks in select municipalities.
- Form a caucus among the newly elected reformist MPs to promote women's political participation.
- Prioritize voter mobilization strategies.

Introduction

Local politics in Lebanon has become the site of a form of a political alternative to the country's predominantly sectarian system. This is mainly because the local sphere is where the Lebanese state's failure is most evident. The lack of services, inadequate housing, electricity and water cuts and solid waste mismanagement, are all symptoms of bad governance, affecting citizens regardless of their religious, sectarian and ideological backgrounds. It is this proximity to everyday life that makes local politics a critical sphere, where frustration with the state of affairs can yield action for change. In Lebanon, this alternative mode of action – which will be analysed in this research – has intricate ties to civil society and grass-root advocacy networks.

As in many other countries, women in Lebanon have played a significant role in organising this form of politics against the country's entrenched sectarian political structure and its ruling elites. However, this crucial role that these women played in their communities has not been translated into electoral success. Lebanon has one of the world's lowest rates of female representation in local politics.

This research investigates the experiences of women in running for, and holding office in local government in Lebanon. Its primary purpose is to identify challenges and opportunities that the country's municipal politics creates for women's political participation. We are specifically interested in exploring how women and men involved in local elections view women's role in local politics, and the strategies they have developed to this end. We also examine the experiences of women who have successfully been elected, and the obstacles they have faced while in office. Throughout the study, we analyse *Beirut Madinati* ("Beirut is my city"), a civil society-turned-political movement with impressive results in the 2016 local elections in Beirut. The movement is one example of a strand of Lebanese politics that has characteristics conducive to furthering the role of women in politics.

This research is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 14 people. Our respondents were both women and men, including former candidates for municipal elections, researchers, politicians, campaign staff, volunteers, journalists and civil society representatives. The interviews were conducted by a team based in Lebanon and London. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing us to explore a broad range of topics relevant to local campaigns. For security and privacy reasons, we have kept our respondents anonymous.

The report proceeds in the following order. In the first part, we provide a brief background of the municipal system in Lebanon, and the extent of women's local representation. In the second part, we discuss the main findings of the research under four themes: i) patriarchal norms, family domination and sectarianism in local contexts, ii) urban-rural dynamics, iii) patronage, access to resources and developmental activism, iv) campaigning, gender norms in office and male allies. Finally, in the conclusion, we sum up the main findings of this research and propose policies and strategies to increase women's political participation at the local level in Lebanon.

Local governance, women and politics in Lebanon

There are three tiers to Lebanon's administrative system, a system largely derived from the country's Ottoman past. The country is divided into eight governorates (muhafazat). Each one of these is divided into districts (qada'), which in turn, are divided into municipalities (baladiyyat). There are around 1,100 municipalities, and these can form municipal federations to conduct joint projects. Most municipalities are members of municipal federations.[1] A large number of municipalities in a country of 4.5 million people might give the impression of a highly decentralised system. Yet Lebanon is one of the few countries in the region that has not undertaken any meaningful decentralisation reform. The country's municipal system is still governed by the Municipalities Law of 1977. There have been amendments to the law, yet these have not involved structural changes.

The 1977 law formally equips municipalities with a broad range of powers, including urban planning, transportation, wastewater management, solid waste management, municipal police and public health. Central government offices, such as The District Commissioner (qa'im maqam), Governor (muhafiz) or the Minister of the Interior also manage several of these functions, but tasks and responsibilities are not clearly delineated between these different units. Financially, municipalities are highly dependent on central government resources. There is a Municipality Investment Fund that transfers budgets from the centre, yet transfers of these funds rarely occur according to formal criteria and on time.[2] This creates an environment conducive to corruption. As a result, most municipalities lack the resources to provide service to their constituencies.

[1]   Ziad Abu-Rish, "Municipal Politics in Lebanon", Middle East Report 280, Fall 2016.
[2]   Sleiman, A. "Reforming Decentralisation in Lebanon: The State of Play", Democracy Reporting International. Briefing Paper 80, April 2017.

Each municipality has a council that acts as the decision-making body. Municipal councils have nine to twenty-one members, with the number determined by each municipality's population.[3] Council members are voted in using a bloc-vote list (rather than a proportional-vote) system for a period of six years. Unlike the national parliament, there are no sectarian quotas in the municipal councils. The candidates who receive the greatest number of votes are elected. This system supports cross-sectarian electoral alliances since candidates must secure the support of districts larger than their own to be elected. During the voting process, voters can choose from a range of lists and party affiliations. On the other side, the method provides for a winner-takes-all situation. If its candidates obtain the most votes (a majority or plurality), a single electoral list can dominate the council. Even if a popular list, party, or individual receives a large number of votes, it may not necessarily be elected to the council.

From the perspective of women's political participation in local government, municipalities present several opportunities. These include smaller voting districts, a lack of sectarian quotas, and the relatively limited influence of the political parties in local elections. As a result, more women run in local elections than in parliamentary elections. As is seen from the table below, the share of female nominees for municipalities is becoming higher than that of parliament during each election cycle.

Female candidates & winners: parliamentary versus municipal elections

	Total Seats	Candidates		Winners	
		Number	% of total candidates	Number	% of total winners
Parliamentary Elections (2005)	128	14	3.5	6	4.7
Parliamentary Elections (2009)	128	12	2.0	4	3.1
Parliamentary Elections (2018)	128	111	11.4	6	4.6
Parliamentary Elections (2022)	128	157	15	8	6
Municipal Elections (2004)	8,976	514	2.8	206	2.3
Municipal Elections (2010)	11,704	1,346	5.6	536	4.6
Municipal Elections (2016)	12,139	1,519	6.9	663	5.4

Source: Kassem, 2012; UNDP Women in Municipal Elections 2016

Despite the more favourable environment at the local level for women's political participation, Lebanon has one of the region's lowest levels of women's political representation. As our discussion below will show, the underrepresentation of women in local government is a product of multiple factors, including traditional and conservative norms regarding the place of women in society, the dominant role that families play in local elections, patronage politics that favours men in positions of economic power, and the lack of political will on the part of political parties to nominate women candidates.[4]

However, in recent years, there is also a trend toward women's political participation. In the 2016 elections, more women were elected to local councils compared to the 2010 elections, increasing the female representation in local government from 4.7 to 5.4 per cent. In Beirut, the campaign of Beirut Madinati gained an impressive 32 percent of the vote. Through its improved representativity processes with a 50-50 female-male gender allocation, Beirut Madinati attracted the attention of women voters. Madinati's success was unprecedented in the history of Lebanon. Even though the movement was not able to win a seat due to the winner-take-all system, its electoral performance suggested that change was possible. Beirut Madinati is a product of a decade of advocacy and grass roots community movements that have grown in the face of the Lebanese state's failure. This wave of activism acquired intensity with the 2015 protests over the "garbage crisis" and 2019 uprisings.

In the next section, we discuss how women and men involved in the local elections see these contests, their own experiences, and the challenges they face in furthering the representation of women.

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[3] The smallest councils preside over around 2,000 inhabitants. The largest councils represent municipalities with populations of 24,000 or more. Beirut and Tripoli have the highest populations, with an exceptional 24 council members each.
[4] Helou, M. (2009) "Women Quota in Lebanon? A False Promise?", Al-Raida, Issue 126-127: 58-65.

Discussion of Findings

Patriarchal norms, family dominance and sectarianism in local contexts

As in many similar contexts, patriarchal norms constrain women's political participation in local government structures. Several women interviewed in the study highlighted how culture and social norms promote a value system that limits women to the domestic sphere. Explaining her own experience of running in the 2004 local elections as a pregnant woman, one respondent said, "people would tell me 'what you are going to do in the municipality? Go raise your kids'".[5] Such words, she said, encouraged her to continue her fight: "I had to prove that I could win as a mother and a working woman." While initially careful to define herself and her work in terms of policy, rather than politics, her experiences moved her to a position in which she came to think of her candidacy itself as a political act against patriarchy. These social norms are not unique to Lebanon. Women in many countries face social norms that reject their visibility in public life. Especially in local contexts, such norms gain a particular strength, making politics strictly a male endeavour.

While social norms have an adverse effect on women's political participation, what determines Lebanon's local electoral processes are bargaining processes between dominant families. As most respondents confirmed, families play a critical role throughout the electoral process, including the nomination, formation of electoral lists and campaigning. Most often, two or three extended families dominate local decision-making structures, depending on the size and sectarian composition of the area in question. The first step of this process is identifying who would represent the family. This is an important question that requires, as one respondent noted, strategic thinking and internal negotiations among the important members of the extended family.

Since families are often linked by tribal loyalties, which intersect with sectarian allegiance, identifying the representative of the broader family interests depends on various factors such as candidate background, access to resources, the ability to enhance the family's prestige and forge patron-client relations (not only with the community but also with patrons in the centre).[6] Not all members of the same extended family belong to the same party, it is often the case than extended families have members linked to different political parties. Once the family reaches an internal agreement on whom to nominate, negotiations can take place between different families. Depending on the size of the local area, families mostly negotiate over the terms of mayorship. If one family, for instance, leads the municipality for one term, then negotiations often involve the question of transferring mayorship to the other family for the next term. Sometimes families can agree to divide the term (6 years) among themselves: one family may lead the municipality for the first three years while the other family leads for the next three years.

It is not only the mayor that families decide on – they also negotiate on the list of municipal council. One respondent who first became a council member, then ran for mayorship at the next elections, said that despite having achieved the consensus of different families for her mayorship, she had no influence over the list for council members.[7] Like her candidacy, the list was also compiled through negotiations between different families. Yet, she was happy that she was able to influence the selection of the deputy mayor. This indicates that the mayor's influence over her team was significantly limited by family preferences.

Under these conditions, the first barrier to women's political nomination starts within their own family. Families mostly choose male members as their representatives. The question is not simply about managerial fitness, but rather one of representing the family to the outside world. Rather than a simply social preference for male leadership, the decision also carries significant economic considerations. Mayors need to be engaged in tough negotiations with the central government, which families believe, requires male leadership.

As explained earlier, Lebanon has an impressively high number of municipalities. Some are so small that one extended family could dominate the entire municipality. The Lebanese state is perennially weak and negotiates some social control through patronage networks. Over the years, this has led to the creation of new municipalities. In this sense, municipalities have a double function: they bring the state closer to people, while at the same time opening state resources to local power holders, which are often families and landowners. The intensity of competition for access to state resources led to the enduring trend of "municipalisation" across Lebanon.

While patronage can be an attractive promise in municipalities, all too often, the reality is that the flow of funds from the centre is irregular and therefore unreliable. There is a Municipality Investment Fund in charge of transferring funds to local governments, yet its budget transfers are often sporadic and involve

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[5] Interview, 7 December 2021.
[6] Makhoul, J. and Harrison, L. (2004), "Intercessory Wasta and Village Development in Lebanon", Arab Studies Quarterly, 26(3): 25-41.
[7] Interview, 29 November 2021.

serious delays.[8] Central government officials often exert discretionary power on the amount and timing of fund allocation. Receiving funds requires a lot of negotiations between local government officials and their counterparts in the central government. Often, these negotiations intersect with broader sectarian politics and their respective political parties.[9] The process means that municipalities often prioritise external opportunities over internal responsibilities, looking out for the needs of their constituencies.

Women are at a disadvantage here, not because women cannot negotiate for access to state resources, but rather because men are traditionally perceived to be better at such negotiations. Municipal officials, as was clear from our interviews, spend most of their time looking for funds. Communities tend to evaluate candidates by their connections to political parties and business leaders. It is often the case that men have such connections, and women do not. Especially in rural settings, women tend to stay home while men travel and are more likely to build political and business relationships.

There are also institutional barriers to women's political participation in local government. Individuals are only allowed to vote and run for office in the districts of their official hometown. At birth, every child is registered in their father's village or home city. Men maintain this registry their entire lives. Women, however, are "married off" to other families, at which point their registry is transferred to that of their husbands'. It is theoretically possible to modify one's registration address. In reality, most individuals find it incredibly difficult to do so due to the amount of bureaucracy involved.

Lebanon's national parliament has official quotas for confessional groups. Since there are fewer seats in the national parliament compared to local councils, and since seats are allocated confessionally, it is difficult for women to obtain these seats. On the local level, however, no confessional quotas exist. There is a far greater number of seats, and the stakes and prestige of the seats are not as high, which makes it easier for women to take part in contests. This, however, does not mean that sectarian tendencies do not play into these elections. While the system is not sectarian in the formal sense, in practice, the local political arena remains a site where family structures, clientelism and social norms play out against a very sectarian background.

Sectarianism in Lebanon is not just formally embedded in the personal status law and citizenship practice, it is also spatial. The thousand municipalities reflects the desire to map sectarianism onto the country's terrain. Many municipalities are homogeneous in sectarian terms. In such homogenous communities, it is often religious figures who assume positions of leadership. Speaking about her experience, one woman in a Druze village said that when she ran in the elections in 1998, the local religious sheikh opposed her candidacy.[10] In 2004, when she decided to run for mayor, she visited the same sheikh to receive his blessing. Since she performed well as a council member, this time the sheikh did not oppose her. She credits the sheikh's tacit support for muting conservative dissent against her candidacy for mayor. The episode suggests that while it is possible for women to be elected to these offices, they have to obtain a nod of approval from a religious leader to do so.

Conditions are similar in Muslim towns and regions as well, especially for women living in conservative areas, where political power is often concentrated in the hands of Islamist parties. Up until the mid-2000s, Islamist parties opposed women's participation in politics, with several imams issuing fatwas to ban them.[11] In confessionally mixed neighbourhoods, Islamist parties could support female candidates from other sects, while denying women of their own sect any space in political world. For instance, instances of Hezbollah (a Shia party) supporting a Sunni woman or a leftist, secular female candidate, or a Sunni religious party casting its support for a Christian female candidate, were not unusual. These cross-sectarian alignments often depend on the nature of dominant sectarian and political rivalries in the area. The prevalence of electoral alliances could work in the favour of female candidates, especially those of secular background.

Religious norms do not only affect the nomination and election of women, but also their post-election performance. For instance, religious parties, especially in Muslim towns, often make it compulsory for female members of municipal councils to get the party's permission before they schedule meetings.[12] These parties also do not want women in their group to be seen to work extended hours, not wanting them to distance them too much from domestic responsibilities. This further widens the gap between women of different sects. While some can productively engage in political work, others fall shy of their potential.

The way religious parties treat women in politics is still far from ideal, yet there are also important positive developments in their approach to women. More and more religious parties are nominating women in

[8]   "Decentralising Lebanon-Utopia or a feasible next step?", Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, The Lebanese Papers 2-10, October 2020.
[9]   Karam, G.J., "Beyond Sectarianism: Understanding Lebanese Politics through a Cross Sectarian Lens", Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, No. 107, April 2017.
[10]   Interview, 29 November 2021.
[11]   Kassem, F. S. (2012) "Can women break through? Women in municipalities: Lebanon in comparative perspective", Women's Studies International Forum, 35: 233-255.
[12]   Ibid.

local elections. This is partly driven by normative considerations – the social pressure to include women has reached religious groups as well. Partly, however, it is also due to grassroots competition. Islamist parties across the region have been seeking to connect to female networks more effectively. In Turkey, for instance, the Islamist parties won the mayoralty of Istanbul in 1994, and a crucial part of the campaign was women campaigning door-to-door, mobilising female voters. The insight here was that conservative women in the peripheral neighbourhoods of large cities lived largely segregated lives, and engaging them was only possible through a specialized female group in the party.

Urban & rural dynamics

Urban/rural dynamics have a major influence on women's political participation in Lebanon. As explained above, the process of local elections is highly determined by the families, significantly reducing the role of political parties. Since most municipalities, especially small ones, share the same sect, political parties usually prefer not to interfere in local dynamics that would create animosity. In the national vote, they rely on the votes of their local sectarians. As one respondent says, "no one wants to mess with a family of 600 people".[13] Political parties neither have the capacity to determine local politics nor do they shape electoral lists. The most they can do is to negotiate with families to keep some people out of these lists.

The situation in the urban areas and big cities is different. Here, local elections resemble the national ones. Political parties assume a much greater role in determining the candidates and making up the electoral lists. They are heavily invested in the campaign process by providing money, teams and platforms. Thus, elections, as one respondent put it, are more about the broader political dynamics of the country than the city's development.[14] This was recently challenged by the electoral campaign of *Beirut Madinati*. While we will discuss *Beirut Madinati* later in this report, it is important to note that its city-centred and development-focused strategy in 2016 induced even mainstream sectarian parties to develop their own campaign programme for the first time.

The relative importance of political parties in urban politics has several explanations. First, elections in big cities like Beirut and Tripoli act as bellwethers ahead of national elections and therefore have symbolic significance. Second, since populations are larger, and revenues allocated from the central government are also correspondingly larger, these cities are lucrative for parties to govern. Third, big cities are mixed in sectarian terms, which means greater competition among political parties. Owing to these factors, elections in big cities reflect the dynamics of national elections.

The differences between elections in cities and rural areas present women with different challenges and opportunities. There is a broad agreement among respondents that small-scale politics provide a more favourable environment for women candidates. One respondent said that campaigning in such areas is simply easier.[15] Since the candidate already has existing connections to the community (either she is known for her profession or because of her family), she went on, campaigning does not require a lot of capital. In small settings, another respondent said, everyone knows each other, the campaign is more personal and intimate, compared to a big city where the candidate must have built greater resources to reach out to the electorate.[16]

There are also economic dynamics in small and rural municipalities that favour women. The Lebanese election system requires that candidates resign from their public sector jobs to be able to run in elections. Since men in rural settings are mostly employed in the civil service or as soldiers, this means that they risk losing their jobs, or even careers if they run. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to have either flexible employment or none at all. That is one of the reasons why rural areas have more female candidates than urban areas.[17] Meanwhile, women in big cities need to play the established political game in order to be nominated by the parties. This often involves being part of large networks of patronage and complying with established party lines. In a competitive environment dominated by parties, an independent campaign, especially by a woman, is highly difficult.

These dynamics manifest themselves mostly in the capital city of Beirut, which assumes an exceptional status in the country's administrative system. While the local government system in Lebanon is not formally sectarian, providing municipalities with extensive powers at least in formal terms, is not the case in Beirut. The mayor of Beirut (head of the municipal council) despite being elected, does not have executive powers. The city is governed by a governor, who is a central government appointee. He holds executive power, which elsewhere in the country is vested with the mayor. The mayor is traditionally Sunni, while the governor is traditionally Christian.

This symbolic role for the mayor had the effect of reducing public interest in Beirut. As a result, despite it

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[13]   Interview, 18 November 2021.
[14]   Interview, 24 November 2021.
[15]   Interview, 18 November 2021.
[16]   Interview, 25 November 2021.
[17]   Kassem, F. S. (2012), Ibid. p. 241.

being the capital city, turnout rates in Beirut's local elections have been low. In the 2016 elections, they were below 20 percent. Beirut Madinati's campaign produced considerable excitement, but the overall turnout remained the same (roughly the same as in 2010). As well as overall public disbelief that their vote would not change politics, the low turnout rates in Beirut are also due to the fact that many of those registered to vote in the capital do not reside there.[18]

Differences between urban and rural contexts also affect the way women candidates run their campaigns once nominated. In rural areas, campaigns are more intimate, largely based on door-knocking tactics. There is also less need for voter targeting or social media campaigns. In big cities such as Beirut, Tripoli and Saida, races are more competitive, and campaigns need to be more rigorous, far-reaching and better funded. Here, female respondents in our study said that they faced challenges in accessing traditional media channels, and that they relied heavily on social media to reach out to voters. Voter targeting and in-person visits to specific districts, especially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the peripheries, are also important in big cities. Women candidates also are actively engaged in large meetings and festivals to gather crowds. Beirut Madinati recently started conducting fundraising drives, yet how this trend is to continue remains to be seen. Fundraising can be a vital tool for women as it enables them to compete on the same level as men and entrenched political parties and families. It can also be an opportunity for people to directly participate in their campaigns.

Patronage, access to resources and developmental activism

As in other countries, local politics in Lebanon is marked by clientelism. For many citizens, voting is less about changing politics, and more a means to access resources, including employment, healthcare and education. As most of the politicians we interviewed for this study said, the persistent question they receive from voters is "what will you give me if I vote for you?" In an environment characterised by the state's weak capacity to deliver, especially at a municipal context, many people see their vote as a commodity to exchange in return for benefits. Elections are an instance where rational citizens exercise their political choice free from the socio-political relationships in which they are embedded. They are important sites in which many Lebanese people voice their needs and demands.

These patron-client dynamics pose significant challenges for women, whose access to resources remains limited. Those from big, wealthy families, may have resources to distribute. For most women, however, the way to overcome the resource challenge can be to participate in civil society. Lebanon's social sphere is very much NGO-ised. These NGOs predominantly employ women professionals and are located in large urban areas, providing a variety of services to Lebanese citizens. For many women and men interviewed, NGOs act as stepping stones for their political careers, shaping the way they conduct politics.

The NGO-isation of Lebanon is mainly the result of the state's failure to provide public services. This in turn, has been exacerbated by privatisation in the name of ensuring greater efficiency in the 1990s and 2000s. Private companies began to provide services such as waste collection, education and health, and to this day, these are often extension of political parties.[19] The system works like this: political parties give out large bids to their own firms. They also channel part of the profits to their ecosystem of NGOs to provide public services, and pocket the rest. These NGOs are therefore mechanisms through which parties provide services to their sectarian strongholds.

As well as party-led charities and NGOs, there are also NGOs that are dependent on external, mostly Western funds. These NGOs too, engage in service delivery, such as distributing food, installing electricity and water infrastructure, repairing sewage systems, building schools and running clinics. They also provide employment, especially to the middle class, educated women and young people. From the perspective of women's political ventures in local government, NGOs serve many different functions. Many respondents highlighted their previous engagements with NGOs as important components of their political careers. According to one respondent, his work in NGOs (in this case, working on community-based developmental projects), made him well known in the community.[20] Another respondent said that NGO work had been important in building bridges with the community.[21]

NGO experience could be more important for women than for men. When women run in local elections, they often receive derogatory comments from some segments of society. One respondent said that she received negative reactions, especially on twitter: "they told me 'what would you do in municipality?', 'go cook for your kids', 'what would you know about roads?', 'are you an expert in infrastructure?' or 'do you know how sewage systems work?'".[22] Another respondent shared a similar sentiment, saying "when

[18]   Chaaban. J., Haidar, D., Ismail, R. and Shidrawi, M. "Beirut's 2016 Municipal Elections: Did Beirut Madinati Permanently Change Lebanon's Electoral Scene", Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, September 2016.
[19]   Harb, M. "Cities and Political Change: How Young Activists in Beirut Bred an Urban Social Movement", Power2Youth. Working Paper. No. 20, September 2016.
[20]   Interview, 18 November 2021.
[21]   Interview, 24 November 2021.
[22]   Interview, 15 December 2021.

one runs in local elections, one is expected to be an expert in asphalt, water, lighting, sewage," which she suggested, were perceived to be masculine interests.[23] In this context, NGO experience is a way to overcome some of these perceptions, to show voters that women have experiences directly relevant to the task of local government.

Perhaps more importantly, NGO experience is a way for women to show that they can raise money for public projects. Prior experience in NGOs can mean having connections to international development agencies and expert networks that can help to funnel money into municipal projects. One respondent emphasised how her NGO work helped her obtain World Bank funding for a municipal project.[24] Another one brought her network of experts, including urban planners, into her municipal work once she was elected.[25] Others, through their educational and work experience abroad, were able to establish relations with foreign cities to transfer their expertise to the municipality.

These accounts are not exceptional. Most of the female candidates interviewed in this project were either involved in associations before running in the local elections or had a history of volunteering in public projects. Those who ran in the elections all highlighted their NGO experience in their campaigns. Claiming to have links in the NGO world thus signals that one can compete with the party-political structure that other candidates may have behind them.

NGOs not only inject funds into the municipalities, but also change the way politics is conducted. NGOs in Lebanon are deeply engaged in democracy and governance work, promoting liberal values, issue-based politics, active citizenship and female empowerment.[26] The dissemination of these ideas, especially among young people and women who either work with NGOs or are involved in their programs, has furthered already growing public frustrated with the sectarian system.[27] This frustration often leads to the development of more scientific, policy-based approaches to politics. In Lebanon, the "political" has a negative connotation among the public – it is often seen as upholding private over public interests. On the other hand, the world of NGOs promotes the gathering of data, statistics-based policies, and the overall aspiration to produce measurable outcomes.

We have observed that respondents who have transitioned to political life from NGOs are well versed in the language of policy, and use it particularly in local elections. They draft policy programmes and refrain from excessive promises, focusing on developmental targets concerning pollution, waste collection, transportation, accessibility, and recreational areas such as parks and libraries, and community centres. Even their electoral slogans resonate with one another:

- "I want to live in Sin el Fil"
- "Beirut is my city"
- "Development creates a sense of belonging"
- "It's time to do politics differently"
- "We can live better"

Some candidates see the campaign as a way to educate the public on the role of municipality. There is a sense among many of the interviewees that, after decades of sectarian politics, the Lebanese people have the wrong expectations from elections. Rather than playing into those expectations, they see their campaigns as an effort to change expectations. Recounting his interactions with voters, one former candidate said "the expectation is that you need to provide something for their vote."[28] He suggested another way to approach the vote: "I said that if you vote for me, I'll represent you in the municipal council". Reflecting on the experience, he said "the candidate uses his own time. What else is he going to do?" In this setting, the election is not merely about issues or identity politics, but a clash of contending concepts of citizenship.

The growing influence of NGOs created space for "developmental activism" at the local level. Here, development is less about economic progress, and more a language that provides an alternative political, one, that delineates acceptable forms of relationship between the state and citizen. Reflecting this perspective, one respondent said, "there is no sense of belonging in Lebanon. Sectarian affiliations come first. The only way that people can feel a sense of belonging is through development. That is why I used development in my slogan."[29] Another respondent shared a similar sentiment, saying that the municipality should be the site of developmental work, not politics.[30]

[23]   Interview, 24 November 2021.
[24]   Interview, 29 November 2021.
[25]   Interview, 14 December 2021.
[26]   Nagel, C. and Staeheli, L. (2015) "International Donors, NGOs, and the Geopolitics of Youth Citizenship in Contemporary Lebanon", Geopolitics, 20(2): 223-247.
[27]   Fawaz, M. "Beirut Madinati and the Prospects of Urban Citizenship", The Century Foundation. April 16, 2019.
[28]   Interview, 29 November 2021.
[29]   Interview, 18 November 2021.
[30]   Interview, 7 December 2021.

For all its popularity, the prospect of development in Lebanon, especially in a local context is dim. Respondents interviewed in this project are aware that their capacity to bring "development" to the country is limited. Perhaps the value of not promising much, of focusing on "small objectives" comes from this recognition.[31] Municipalities do not have the financial resources to have a significant impact in terms of development. Service provision is in dire straits, with the "garbage crisis" that started in 2015 being emblematic of the country's larger crisis in governance. The ability of NGOs to provide services is equally limited, especially since international funds to countries like Lebanon are drying up. In these circumstances, development is less about economic development, and more about articulating a different form of politics based on active citizenship.

The rise of Beirut Madinati fits into this context. The movement was the most salient example of this new empirical approach to politics. As we discuss in greater detail, we believe that this form of politics offers a relatively advantageous environment for aspiring women politicians. Women have played a significant role in bringing about the empirical, issues-based politics, and have an interest in developing it further.

Campaigning, gender norms in office, and male allies

Overall, we have argued that there are strong structural inequalities that make it more difficult for women to compete in local elections. It is also true, however, that women have different options while campaigning, some of which could offer them advantages. As explained earlier, in small towns and rural districts, campaigns tend to be more personal. They involve visits to households, attending weddings, funerals and community gatherings, where candidates are expected to engage with communities more intimately. Here, women candidates often find it easier to get into more intimate domains of households, often inhabited by women. As one male respondent said, "when I go to a household, I only see men. I never get to see women in the household. But my female colleagues can enter into those places as well."[32] It is true that social norms hinder women's political participation, yet the same norms can also be an advantage, especially if they have overcome the initial barrier to their candidacy. This is all the more important in the countryside. In urban centres, campaigning on the street level and on social media is crucial. In the countryside, it is not enough to knock on doors, one has to enter them and spend time with voters. In the conservative outskirts of cities, too, women have the advantage of mobilizing women's committees.

Easier access to women voters also helps female candidates to develop a better understanding of the needs of this voter block. Women voters have a particularly grounded notion of the municipality and what it needs. They are the ones who need safe parks and well-lit streets, who suffer the most from water and electricity cuts, and who are most invested in the quality of nurseries and schools. Having direct access to women, helps women candidates to develop an intuitive understanding for these problems, as well as to mobilise support for these projects.

Women candidates interviewed also place a stronger emphasis on the inclusion of youth, women and other marginalised communities in local politics, build links with community-led activist groups that have proliferated in urban settings, especially in Beirut. Given the importance of youth activist movements in the country's urban realm over the last decade, women candidates have been better at reflecting the changing social dynamics in their political programmes. Beirut Madinati's success in the 2016 elections was the most visible example of how youth movements have been energising citizen-centred politics at the local level. Yet while the importance of including women and youth is growing in Lebanese electoral culture, it is not yet part of campaign programs. There is a need to specifically target these groups in campaign programs.

As well as the significance of mobilising youth and women, most female respondents also stressed the importance of male allyship. In a society where power is concentrated in the hands of men, finding male partners to support women in positions of power is particularly important. This is both the case for urban contexts, where women bring the expertise of their male networks into municipal work or in a small town, where more traditional male support, from clerics, for instance, can open doors for women. Given the daunting task of balancing between home, work, and childcare, the allyship starts at home but extends well beyond it. Women who manage to win elections are those who built strong partnerships with men.

While recognising the important changes in Lebanese society with respect to the role of family and authority, leading to a more favourable environment for women's political participation, many women respondents still think the level of support they receive from men is far from ideal. The respondents spoke of female solidarity, and how women on the municipal councils are better able to build relations with community networks, bring women's voices into municipal work, employ women, and incentivise other women to be involved in public life. Men, on the other hand, the respondents complained, tend to push women towards areas of policy that are related to domestic life. One respondent suggested that there is

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[31] Interview, 25 November 2021.
[32] Interview, 18 November 2021.

a gendered division of labour in the council, with women limited to social assistance , while men take on infrastructure and development projects.[33] Gender norms extend into the NGO sphere. One respondent said, "international NGOs and their local counterparts always train women. They should train men on how to support women's candidacies."[34]

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[33]   Interview, 15 December 2021.
[34]   Interview, 24 November 2021.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Lebanese women are actively engaged in all aspects of economic and social life, through employment, community work, and advocacy efforts, yet this has not yet translated into electoral success. The underrepresentation of women results from a combination of factors. One important impediment is the country's male-dominated sectarian political structure infused with political party patronage. At the local level, this structure gains a familial component, making politics a matter of negotiation among influential families.

Despite all these challenges, the local election system offers opportunities for women's political participation. Because of the large number of municipal councils, the lack of sectarian allocation, and limited influence of political parties in the election process, women have found it easier to run in local elections. Especially in the recent decade, local politics has emerged as a major site through which alternative modes of political action have been put into practice. At the heart of these alternative forms of political action is development. As our interviews have shown, women candidates are forerunners of developmental activism. They promote policy-based, non-sectarian approaches, productively engage with citizen-led community advocacy, find creative solutions to people's real problems, and disseminate new norms of political conduct. Beirut Madinati is both an indicator and product of this new way of doing politics. While its political future is not guaranteed, its success in 2016 stands as testimony that there is a demand for change in Lebanon.

Recommendations

- *Identify women already in leadership and build their political skills*: women involved in advocacy networks often already have developed strong governing capacities that voters can trust. They have the necessary skills, and on-ground experience working with the community in the worst times. Thus, it is important to engage with them to build their political skills and encourage them to compete on the municipal level. This includes coaching on social and traditional media, where women are underrepresented.
- *Promote non-affiliated campaigns*: Our interviews have shown that successful electoral campaigns were typically ones where candidates ran either as part of national networks or networked into local community groups. These campaigns sought to appear issues-focused to lessen pressure from the established parties. Persuasive campaigns were those showing a high level of engagement in local affairs. This engagement could involve providing information and support networks to these women as well as providing them with training and mentoring in relation to fundraising, mobilization and program-oriented campaigns.
- *Set up women councillors' desks in select municipalities*: these would support women who have already won elections. They would provide skills, knowledge, and networks to women councillors to ensure their success once elected. These desks could serve many functions:
  o Increase administrative capacity within municipality to encourage further participation of women in local government decision making
  o Engage with councillors to promote gender sensitivity across the municipality
  o Raise awareness of male allyship by training new councillors on establishing gender equality networks, creating leadership roles and programmes for women, and ensuring that policy discussions and implementation reflect the concerns of local women
- *Form a caucus among the newly elected reformist MPs to promote women's political participation*: Lebanon's recent parliamentary elections brought 14 reformists into the parliament. Of these, 4 are women. These new members of parliament could be encouraged to form a formal or informal caucus in the parliament to promote women's representation in national and local politics. The caucus could be a platform to reinvigorate the discussions within parliament to make necessary legal and regulatory changes, including replacing the block voting system with a proportional representation system, instituting quotas for women, decreasing the voting age to 18, and holding direct elections for the mayor. Such reforms, as well as a full revamp of the voter registration system, could enhance independent turnout and election results.
- *Prioritize voter mobilization strategies*: Despite the growing mobilization of grassroot advocacy networks, and people's willingness to vote for change, Lebanon still suffers from low turnout rates. Turnout rates in national elections decreased from 54 percent in 2009 to 49 percent in 2018. In 2022, it remained the same as the previous elections at 49 percent. Turnout rates in local elections are far lower. In the last local elections, despite its vigorous campaign, Beirut Madinati was not able to increase total voter turnout in Beirut. To make progress in this field, a special study of the problems in voter turnout at the local level could be conducted, and women candidates could then be given training on methods of overcoming these limitations in the next local elections.

Acknowledgements

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About the Project

"Winning with Women" is a project lead by Global Partners Governance Foundation (GPGF) with its local partner The Lebanese Organization for Studies and Trainings (LOST) and is funded by Porticus Foundation. The project aims to support and empower women's political participation at the Lebanese local governments by: providing trainings to equip potential women candidates with the necessary technical skills and political knowledge, organizing workshops about gender responsive policy making and allyship which aim to build bridges between potential women candidates and influential men in the Lebanese political stage, enhancing dialogue and stimulating support for women's political engagement, and conducting researches that would act as toolkits for the women candidates.