



# UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND FEMINIST ACTORS IN LEBANON'S 2019 PROTESTS

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A group of women protesting in Riad el Solh square in Beirut, on 10-26- 2019.  
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# INTRODUCTION

Women have been at the core of Lebanon's popular protests since they began on October 17, 2019, when women joined the protests in mass numbers and the image of a woman kicking a minister's armed guard<sup>1</sup> went viral, making her a national icon. Catalyzed by sweeping wildfires and a proposed tax on WhatsApp, Lebanon's nation-wide protests are in response to a range of long-standing public grievances related to governance, accountability, corruption, human rights violations and economic deterioration. Today, women across the country, from diverse backgrounds, continue to drive the movement, leading on political organizing, civic engagement, gender justice advocacy, the de-escalation of violence, mediation, online mobilization and media coverage.

At the time of writing, the protests are 58 days old and the situation is changing rapidly. As of today, they have been largely peaceful, though incidents marked by high tensions and violence have taken place. In response to these, women have been using tactics that leverage gender stereotypes to depoliticize and deescalate tensions, playing on social norms which see women as secondary, not as political actors, and as in need of protection. Women have been physically inserting themselves into situations deemed as unsafe or at risk of escalation - serving as human buffers between security actors and protesters, and leading marches within and between conflicting communities - to ward off violence and call for peace. In detailing these and other actions this paper does not seek to feed into the argument that women are naturally more peaceful than men. Notions that women are inherently peaceful have been debunked.<sup>2</sup> However, historically women have often been more likely to play peacemaking roles before, during and after conflict for a number of deeply gendered reasons – which include their marginalisation from power, political parties and militias. This marginalization means they may have less invested in the maintenance of the status quo and therefore may be less likely to resort to violence for its maintenance.

As events continue to unfold, this paper seeks to contribute to the documentation of women's representation, roles, and demands within Lebanon's protests, while also examining the use of gendered language and norms by all sides of the country's complex political landscape.<sup>3</sup> This paper situates its analysis within the broader women, peace and security framework, which recognizes women as political actors and peace and security leaders and brokers. Understanding women's contributions to this popular uprising

is an important subject matter. Firstly, global research proves a positive correlation between women's participation in protest movements and non-violence, with movements significantly more likely to remain non-violent when women are participating in large numbers.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, in social and political movements worldwide, women are key actors, who are often systematically sidelined and underrepresented in subsequent political processes, governmental transitions, and negotiations.<sup>5</sup>

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1 The incident was done in effort to prevent the armed guard from firing on civilian protesters.

2 The Elders, "Are women really peaceful?," November 1 2014, <https://theelders.org/news/are-women-really-peaceful>

3 For further feminist and gendered documentation of the protests, see: Al Raida, "Gender and the Revolutions, <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/new-noteworthy/al-raida-upcoming-issue-on-gende.php>; Kohl, "Feminist Revolutionaries," <https://kohjournal.press/issues>.

4 Chenoweth, Erica et al, "Women's Participation and the Fate of Nonviolent Campaigns," OEF Research, September 30, 2019, <https://oefresearch.org/publications/women%E2%80%99s-participation-and-fate-nonviolent-campaigns-report>.

5 For examples in the Arab Uprisings, see: Tannir, Dina and Badaan, Vivienne, "Women and participation in the Arab Uprising: Struggle for Justice, UN ESCWA, 2013, [https://yp-toolbox.unescapsdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ESCWA\\_Women-and-Participation-in-the-Arab-Uprisings-A-struggle-for-Justice.pdf](https://yp-toolbox.unescapsdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ESCWA_Women-and-Participation-in-the-Arab-Uprisings-A-struggle-for-Justice.pdf).

## Methodology

Since the onset of Lebanon's protests, UN Women has been monitoring trends, incidents, and issues related to women and gender across all sides and dimensions of the protests. Primary data includes regular interviews and discussions with over 50 women, both taking part in diverse demonstration events in Beirut, Tripoli, Nabatieh, Baalbek, Hermel, Bsharri, Shouf and Aley, and representing government institutions and women's rights/feminist organizations. Social media data includes analysis from Facebook, Twitter, and online platforms covering protests events such as Akhbar Al Saha and Daleel Thawra, Hiraak Baalbek, Aley Tantafed, Daraj and Megaphone. Over 110 persons' social media profiles were reviewed. Secondary literature on the subject matter is sparse, but rapidly emerging. This paper references local and international press as well as some scholarly and grey literature. The data collection period is until protest day 58, from October 17 to December 13, 2019. Six women from Lebanon, both members of government and feminist civil society actors, reviewed and offered invaluable feedback on this document prior to publishing, as did the office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL).



Women's march in Downtown Beirut carrying candles on 11-6-2019 Copyright Dar al Mussawir

# REPRESENTATION



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## Participation in the protests has been nearly equal or equal to men

Analysis from the first week of the protests suggests that women were at least half of the protest population, according to estimates by UN Women.<sup>6</sup> Defined by the number of women participating in marches, rallies and sit-ins<sup>7</sup> during that time, it was

6 These figures are approximate, sourced by UN Women and partners' observing and tracking the number of women participating in protest events in Beirut, Tripoli, Baalbek, and Nabatieh between October 17 and November 8. The number of female protesters varies by specific geographical location, type of demonstration, and the time of day. Estimates of the number of protesters, disaggregated by gender, should continue to be tracked and triangulated with other sources.

7 Participation in protests can also include forms of cyber activism and boycotting, which are not captured here.

estimated that women made up close to half of the protest population in Beirut and Tripoli, and at least one-third in Baalbek and Nabatieh. According to trends observed to date, women's participation declines at night, particularly in regions outside of Beirut. As discussed later, while women have been key responders in de-escalating violence, as the nature of the violence changes (with greater representation from political parties), it has been observed that women's participation in the protests has also begun to decrease.

While the near gender parity in participation is perceived to be unprecedented compared to other popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the high number of women engaged reflects Lebanon's longstanding and vibrant civil society and history of women's rights and feminist activism.

On social media this trend appears not to be replicated. Recent data shows that women represent around 27% of total users tweeting about the protests, based on the number of Lebanon protest hashtags.<sup>8</sup> This may be due to a gender gap in social media users (e.g. more men than women using social media in Lebanon) and the violence and bullying experienced by women on-line (discussed later).

### Female representation is diverse and intersectional<sup>9</sup>

From Tripoli to Tyre and across the Bekaa, women and girls across sectarian lines, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ages, professions, physical abilities, and sexual orientations are actively partaking in and leading demonstrations. Female youth, particularly students, have urged schools and universities to close as part of the national general strike. Lesbian, bisexual, queer and trans women (LBQT) are visible, openly demonstrating in groundbreaking numbers.<sup>10</sup> Lebanese women from the diaspora mobilized support from abroad, in person and online, and also returned to the country to demonstrate. Despite popular discourse that can homogenize women into one group, recognizing the varied identities and interests of women involved in the protests remains important.

8 Maharat, "Back to Lebanon Protests," December 2019, <https://lebanonprotests.com/report>.

9 Intersectionality here refers to the spectrum of identity factors that affect a women's gender identity, including age, race, class, area of origin, and religion.

10 According to sources thus far, this is largely concentrated in Beirut.

11 Coomaraswamy, "A Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325," 2015, <https://wps.unwomen.org/>

12 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2000/20001031.sc6942.doc.html>.

13 UN Women, "The Government of Lebanon endorses Lebanon's First National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security," September 12, 2019, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/9/press-release-lebanon-first-national-action-plan-on-wps>.

14 Chidiac, Cythnia, "Security Council open debate on Women and Peace and Security," November 4 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fusKH23a8C8>.

### Women's Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and Lebanon's National Action Plan (NAP) on United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325

Women's critical role in preventing and creating sustainable peace is well championed and documented by the global WPS agenda.<sup>11</sup> UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000), the first of the 10 WPS resolutions to be passed by the Security Council, urges Member-States to ensure, inter alia, increased representation of women at all decision making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.<sup>12</sup> In 2017 the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) began the development of Lebanon's NAP 1325 with support from the UN, coordinated by UN Women. Lebanon's National Action Plan for Resolution 1325 was endorsed and passed by the Council of Ministers in September 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Commitments to its importance and implementation have been reinforced by Lebanese government officials throughout the protests. During a recent session on WPS at the UN in New York, Lebanon's Permanent Mission to the UN highlighted women's current political activism in Lebanon as critical to shaping the country's future and further affirmed Lebanon's commitment to the WPS agenda.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the President of NCLW, Claudine Aoun-Roukoz, has made public statements, both on the radio and on twitter, that women protesters standing as a barrier between armed forces and civilians confirms the importance of the National Action Plan for Resolution 1325. In her remarks, Aoun-Roukoz emphasized that women are essential to avoiding conflict, ending violence and building a strong nation.

# ROLES



Women and men clean up rubbish after protests in downtown Beirut- 10-25-2019. Copyright Dar al Mussawir

## Women have helped maintain the non-violent nature of the protests to date

Since the onset of events, women have been widely recognized for their persistence in serving as physical buffers between protesters and security forces in moments of tension. During interviews with women engaged in this tactic, they told UN Women that as protests risked becoming violent, they organized through WhatsApp to quickly meet at protest sites and serve as human barriers.<sup>15</sup> When faced with violence, either against themselves or fellow protesters, women report yelling essentialist tropes such as, 'what's wrong with you animals, I am a woman!'. Older women report strategically utilizing the revered concept of motherhood, reasoning with security personnel with commentary such as, "Don't harm us, I could be your mom."

<sup>15</sup> Three direct reports from women participating in the frontlines, October 26.

This tactic plays on the stereotype and assumption that women are less threatening than men, and are in need of protection, and then subverts this stereotype for the maintenance of peace. It also builds on assumptions that law enforcement personnel will seek to avoid the negative optics of using violence against women, especially against older women. In addition, UN Women received reports of women acting as informal mediators between armed forces and protesters, to negotiate access at roadblocks and to deescalate tensions in provoked moments of conflict. Such incidents have been reported in areas in Nabatieh, Tripoli, Baalbek and Beirut.<sup>16</sup>

On October 26 there was a visible increase in the deployment of female soldiers by the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Armed Forces, possibly in response to the high number of female

<sup>16</sup> Direct reports from women participating in informal mediations, October 25-27.

protesters and perhaps to mitigate the negative optics of forcibly removing women from streets. There has also been some debate around the reaction of the security forces to the protests, with some arguing that limited violence was used and that this is in part due to Raya El Hassan, the first female Minister of Interior in the Arab world, being a woman.

The ways in which women have sought to maintain non-violence in Lebanon is significant and echoes global trends. Global research shows that women's active leadership and engagement is present in 76% of violent campaigns, and in 99% of nonviolent campaigns, and that campaigns with moderate to extensive women's participation are 25% less likely to use armed struggle.<sup>17</sup> There is growing anecdotal evidence that women's tactics to maintain non-violence and to deescalate tensions are increasingly successful in Lebanon. After three nights of violent clashes in late November, women identifying themselves as 'mothers' led unity marches in Beirut, Jal Al-Deeb, and Tripoli<sup>18</sup>, where violence had broken out. No politicized violence related to the protests was reported for almost two weeks following this.

In cities across the country, women have led peace marches to amplify protesters' messages around change and non-violence. In Tripoli, women organized daily peace marches<sup>19</sup> for a period of time. Feminists in Baalbek organized similar marches, where white roses were distributed as a symbol for peace.

17 Chenoweth, Erica et al, "Women's Participation and the Fate of Nonviolent Campaigns," OEF Research, September 30 2019, [https://oefresearch.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/Policy\\_Brief\\_Womens\\_Participation\\_Nonviolent\\_Campaigns\\_Digital\\_o.pdf](https://oefresearch.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/Policy_Brief_Womens_Participation_Nonviolent_Campaigns_Digital_o.pdf).

18 "Mothers lead anti-sectarian marches in Beirut, Tripoli, The Daily Star, November 27, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Nov-27/496366-mothers-lead-anti-sectarian-marches-in-beirut-tripoli.ashx>.

19 Hassan, Azza, "The Wall of Silence in Balbeck Breaks," Al Modon Online (Arabic), October 27 2019, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2019/10/26/شمسطار-البعلبكية-كلن-يعني-كلن> Direct reports from women in Tripoli and Baalbek, November 5 and November 13.

## Mothers' Marches: Historic Events



Mothers' march from Chiyah to Ain El Remmaneh to reject the civil war- Date 11-27-2019. Copyright Dar al Mussawir

Women have been exercising their influence as mothers tactically, using the gendered identity of motherhood as a banner under which to call for an end to violent clashes. On November 27, a Beirut women-led march joined the areas of Chiyah, a Shi'ite stronghold, and Ain-Al Rammeneh, with a large Christian support base after three days of sectarian tensions; the neighborhood is widely considered to be where the Lebanese civil war started in 1975. On 30 November, Christian and Muslim women from the areas surrounding Khandak El-Gamiq, a Shiite majority area, marched together into the area to meet with the mothers of the perceived perpetrators of the violence from the previous week, to call for calm and unity. Initially two rows of men made a barrier to prevent protesters from entering the neighborhood, but they eventually let the marchers pass following negotiations between women and local groups. These marches also supported an intergenerational bridge, where mothers who had experienced the civil war propelled unity with the youth in demanding peace.

## Women drive political activism and civic engagement

Women have led political organizing, planning rallies and marches, writing articles, strategizing, staffing roadblocks, and generating messaging through slogans and signs. Women report that the protests have generated both new spaces and conversations for women's rights and women's political participation, particularly in areas with deeper patriarchal and conservative gender norms. In some of these areas, the recent demonstrations have led to women's increased access to and occupation of public space, especially at night, and has increased the social acceptance of women's political engagement.<sup>20</sup> This has been particularly notable and reported from female protesters in Tripoli.

Public discussions on the country's most pressing issues have dominated city squares, covering subjects such as political reforms, oil and gas governance, the financial crisis, environmental concerns, and pathways for a unified personal status law. Women are partaking and facilitating these conversations, including hosting public teach-ins.<sup>21</sup> A feminist tent in downtown Beirut is set-up to provide a place for women to gather and host events – the entrance reads, “women and feminists welcome.”

20 Direct reports from women in Tripoli and Baalbek, November 5 and November 13.

21 One example is Bedna Na3ref (translation: “We want to know”) a community network organizing public talks through social media platforms: <https://www.daleelhawra.com/listing/bedna-na3ref/>.

22 On December 2, Naji Fliti killed himself due to his incapacity to pay his debts; on December 3, Dany Abi Haidar shot himself in response to his increasing salary cuts; and on December 5, Nazih Aoun poisoned himself due to his dire financial situation after being protractedly unemployed, with 4 children. On 7 December, a man attempted suicide by self-immolating in downtown Beirut.

23 FMI on masculinities in Lebanon: UN Women, Connecting Research and Development, and Promundo, “Understanding Masculinities: results from the international men and gender equality survey in Lebanon,” 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/understanding-masculinities-results-from-the-images-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

## Economic Crisis and Masculinities

The protest movement and the political crisis continues to be fueled by Lebanon's current economic crisis. With the interconnection of these two crises, early December witnessed a rise in male suicides.<sup>23</sup> These are reportedly in response to the deteriorating economic crisis in the country and the men's inability to provide for their households and to meet deeply entrenched notions of Lebanese masculinity. On 7 December, a man self-immolated during a protest in downtown Beirut. While actual figures may even be higher, this recent wave of male suicides exposed and challenged a deeply entrenched notion of Lebanese masculinity, namely his identity as the primary breadwinner.<sup>24</sup> Men's inability to provide for their families challenges the foundations of gender relations in Lebanon – in which men are viewed as men only if they meet societal norms around masculinity, in which taking care of one's family economically is central. The response to these deaths has focused on the need for economic reform and mental health services and is yet to connect to a broader discussion around restructuring gender roles in Lebanon.

Women are also supporting demonstrators' physical and mental health needs by cooking for protestors, collecting and distributing winterization needs, setting up psychosocial first aid services, running self-defense trainings, and providing free legal support along men, in parallel with round clock emergency care from female and male brigades from the Lebanese Red Cross. Daily trash and recycling clean-ups in centralized protests areas have been spearheaded by women. The invisible labor of women and adolescent girls' unpaid care work is also worth noting, with increased hours of child care and house work amidst nation-wide school closures.

Though mostly positive, women also attest that their involvement in the protests have not been without opposition, with some men preventing women from partaking in demonstrations, leading chants, or expressing their political opinions in public forums.<sup>24</sup> Women from the south have reported to UN Women that much of their political activism has been curbed in the last month of the protests, both due to patriarchal socio-cultural norms from within the protest movement and political repression by the anti-protest movement. In much of the south, women confront many gendered barriers to accessing public and political life, with male family members often dictating women's movement and activities. As the protests have continued some have reported that male leaders within the movement have alienated them, only calling upon them when the female gender identity was deemed useful, and at the same time they are targeted by anti-protest movements. Many report that they believe that they were targeted by anti-protesters both in their identity as protestors, but also as women – for violating social norms around a women's role in society.

### Leverage national media coverage

Lebanese female media activists have been using social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to share news independent of mainstream media. In addition, feminist and women's rights advocates are influencing local press with thought pieces and opinion editorials.<sup>25</sup> On November 5, women organized a press conference in downtown Beirut to pay tribute to women's activism and deliver key messages, centering around female political representation on the basis of a 50% quota. Press conferences around women's rights have been increasingly common within the context of the protests, and most recently a press

24 Direct report from women participating in the protests.

25 Geha, Carmen, "No one knows Lebanon's problems better than its women. It's time you started listening," *The New Arab*, November 8 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/11/8/nobody-knows-lebanons-problems-better-than-its-women>; Chebaro, Abir, "Are Women the Antidote to Corruption," *An-nahar*, November 14 2019, <https://en.annahar.com/article/1066059-are-women-the-antidote-to-corruption>; Majed, Rima, "Lebanon Protests: We should not let the ruling class reproduce itself again," *MiddleEast Eye*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/lebanons-golden-opportunity>.

conference on women's nationality rights took place on December 13.<sup>26</sup>

Verbal, sexual and physical harassment against female journalists<sup>27</sup> has been a reoccurring trend throughout the protests, often carried out by men with opposing political positions. This is perceived by women activists as an effort to intimidate and prevent press coverage. In addition, UN Women has documented at least three cases of attempted and perpetrated sexual assault of journalists. On October 23, an Al-Jadeed reporter was groped by a man live on air<sup>28</sup>; on November 1, a second Al-Jadeed journalist prevented an attempted sexual assault while reporting outside of the presidential palace; on November 10, a Sky News Arabia reporter was sexually assaulted by a male protestor while broadcasting live.<sup>29</sup> Lebanese journalists, both men and women, organized a rally in Beirut on November 12 to denounce the escalating trend of violence against female reporters, under the slogan, "Take your hands off me, let me do my job."

### Counter sexism, sexual harassment, gendered threats, and homophobia

Rampant sexism against female protesters in Lebanon began in the early days of the protests, with men in Lebanon and across the region objectifying women's participation.<sup>30</sup> Women continue to confront gendered threats and sexist remarks on social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) as well cyber-bullying in response to

26 Lebanese Women's Right to Nationality and Full Citizenship, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/jinsiyati/photos/>.

27 There have been additional cases of sexist attacks against female journalists, such as the cases of Dima Sadek and Rachel Karam.

28 "Outrage as 'sleazy' man gropes female Lebanese reporter on live camera," *The New Arab*, October 23 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/10/23/outrage-as-man-gropes-female-lebanese-reporter-on-air>.

29 Zaza, Bassam, "Harassment debate erupts after Lebanese reporter kissed on live broadcast," *Gulf News*, November 12 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/harassment-debate-erupts-after-lebanese-reporter-kissed-on-live-broadcast-1.67775700>.

30 Khalil, Sarah, "Revolutionaries, not 'babes': Lebanon's women protesters call out sexist Arab men for objectifying them," *The New Arab*, October 22 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/10/22/revolutionaries-not-babes-stop-objectifying-lebanons-women-protesters>.

their engagement in the protests and political opinions. These threats to intimidate activism are often gendered as they seek to delegitimize women as political actors and are couched in language around subordination to men (e.g. calling men to ‘control’ their women) and criticize women for their clothing and physical appearance.

In addition to female protesters, female government officials and their supports have been victim to sexist slander. Some examples include the online campaign accusing a female Member of Parliament of having sexual relations with men in the business sector and protesters’ slogans mocking a female Member of Parliament for her decision not to bear children. A female supporter of President Aoun received mass threats and harassment after a video of her declaring “Ana mabsouta” (translation: I am happy) went viral on social media, reproduced in mocking ways. Within the protests, feminists and women have condemned the use of sexist and homophobic chants and slogans used to curse politicians by denouncing the language and offering alternatives.

Although sexist language and online harassment has been reported, feminists and women activists report protesting in relative safety,<sup>31</sup> especially in contrast to other mass uprisings within the MENA region.<sup>32</sup> While perceived to be less frequent in Beirut in comparison to Lebanon’s other cities and towns, women do confront sexual harassment and groping, with heightened incidents during peak crowds. Women have exposed and responded to incident through volunteer ‘committee of guards’<sup>33</sup> and social media accounts such as Harass Tracker, Akhbar Al-Saha<sup>34</sup> and @HarassExposerLB.<sup>35</sup> During this period, a legal case was filed against a serial harasser in Beirut, after more than 50

women submitted testimonies against him.<sup>36</sup> On December 7, over 3000 people, majority female students (10-15% men) marched across the city in recognition of this. The march ended with the ‘a rapist in your path’ dance, which was popularized by Chilean women’s rights actors during protests last month,<sup>37</sup> performed with Arabic lyrics. The rising role of female youth leadership in political organizing is significant for the future of women’s equal representation in Lebanese politics.

Homophobic statements during the protests have generated dissent by feminist and LGBTIQ individuals. As of this writing, two significant incidents include remarks by a television producer denouncing civil protections for LGBTIQ people in Lebanon in late October, and a journalist calling the protests, “a revolution of the liwat,” a derogatory word for gay. This rhetoric has been used to delegitimize the protests and incite discrimination towards LGBTIQ groups.

### National Recognition of Women: A Notable Moment

On October 31, 2019, new lyrics to the national anthem hit the front page of Lebanon’s An-nahar newspaper, with an historic addition: the word women was printed in bold, red, and center.<sup>37</sup> The original lyrics refer to Lebanon as only a birthplace to men. In the aftermath, the new lyrics, finally recognizing women, displayed in a massive sign on the An-nahar office in downtown, have been sung throughout protests, and recorded by artist Carole Samaha.

31 Direct reports from women in Tripoli, Beirut, and Baalbeck.

32 Tadros, Mariz, “Understanding Politically Motivated Sexual Assault in Protest Spaces: Evidence from Egypt (March 2011 to June 2013),” *Social & Legal Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 2016): 93–110. doi:10.1177/0964663915578187.

33 A volunteer community-based committee in Tripoli to protect citizens participating in the protests.

34 Al Akhbar Al Saha, <https://www.facebook.com/akhbaralsahaEN/>.

35 Harassment Exposer LB, <https://twitter.com/harassexposerlb>.

36 “Accused Serial Harasser In Lebanon, Over 50 Testimonies and Counting,” November 29, 2019, <https://www.beirut.com//59023>.

37 <https://qz.com/1758765/chiles-viral-feminist-flash-mob-is-spreading-around-the-world/>

38 “An-nahar pays tribute to Lebanese women,” An-nahar, October 31 2019, <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/480105/annahar-daily-pays-tribute-to-lebanese-women-photo/en>.

# GENDER EQUITABLE DEMANDS



Protests in front of the Lebanese Parliament- Date 11-19-2019. Copyright Dar al Mussawir

The demands of the protest movement have centered on political and economic reform. These demands have been echoed by feminists and women activists, who's primary demands are political and economic reform. Beyond this, key women's demands have included: equal nationality rights, a unified personal status law, increased political representation of women, and legal protection against sexual harassment and violence against women. Ending discrimination in the Jaafari court system, a justice system managed by religious groups whose rulings have reinforced women's lack of custody rights, has also been widely demanded by women in Tyre, Nabatieh, Hermel and Baalbek.

The following gender demands stand out, succeeding decades of women's political organizing in the country:

## • Unified Personal Status Law

Lebanon's 15 separate personal status laws, governing family affairs via the 18 official religious denominations, heavily discriminate against women.<sup>39</sup> Prior to and during the protests, feminist and women's rights activists have been leading advocacy for a unified and civil personal status law, which both guarantees the equal treatment of citizens and overturns systemic gender discrimination enshrined in the law. In a public address in late October, President Aoun stated that the first step to establishing a modern civil

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Unequal and Unprotected: Women's Rights Under Lebanon's Personal Status Laws," January 19 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/19/unequal-and-unprotected/womens-rights-under-lebanese-personal-status-laws>.

state lies in developing a unified personal status law.<sup>40</sup> The feminist organization, KAFA, published a draft personal status law on November 12,<sup>41</sup> and has since been hosting dialogue forums about the topic in public squares across the country.

### • Increased political representation of women

Women are demanding increased political representation in Lebanese politics, including positions in local and national governance. This plea is reflected in attitudinal survey data findings which shows that 77% of men, and 89% women believe that more women should be in positions of political authority.<sup>42</sup> According to the World Economic Forum, Lebanon ranks on 149 out of 152 for political empowerment, followed by Yemen and Oman.<sup>43</sup> There are four women in Lebanon's 2019 Cabinet, out of thirty Ministers, and only six members of parliament in a 128-member legislative body. President Aoun has also emphasized the need for a new cabinet to include both men and women.<sup>44</sup> As of this writing, several female candidates have been put forward within Lebanese media and public political discourse to potentially replace the former Prime Minister Hariri under the new government.

### • Equal nationality and citizenship rights

Lebanon's 1925 nationality law discriminates against women by forbidding them the right to

pass citizenship to their spouses or children.<sup>45</sup> Reforming Lebanon's outdated nationality law is a longstanding demand of women's rights groups and reverberates through protesters' calls in demonstrations across the country. The women's nationality rights campaign, "My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family," rallied women in and outside of Lebanon at demonstrations and on social media to amplifying nationality reform as central to the protest demands. Specific women's marches have been held for this cause. On November 10, the campaign, "my nationality is my dignity," organized a march from the Ministry of Interior in Beirut, with over 1000 people in attendance. In Tyre, over 500 women and men marched for gender equitable citizenship rights on November 8.<sup>46</sup>

### • Feminists call for the inclusion of the most marginalized

Within the broader calls for better governance, feminists are using the platform of Lebanon's protests to call attention to the needs and interests of marginalized groups. Feminist rallies, marches, and discussions are calling for the abolishment of the Kafala system<sup>47</sup>, the improvement of the social protection system for women with disabilities and female-headed households, veiled women's access to decent work and ability to join the judiciary, queer rights, and better protection for all refugees. Feminist expressions of solidarity to women across the MENA region are also abundant, with messages to women in Sudan, Algeria and Iraq, as well as calls to release female political detainees in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

40 National News Agency, "President of the Lebanese Delivers Midterm Address," October 31, 2019, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/109184/President-of-the-Lebanese-Republic-delivers-mid-term-address>.

41 KAFA, "Suggested Law on Unified Personal Status Law," November 12 2019, <https://www.kafa.org.lb/ar/node/392>.

42 UN Women, Connecting Research and Development, and Promundo, "Understanding Masculinities: results from the international men and gender equality survey in Lebanon," 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/understanding-masculinities-results-from-the-images-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

43 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2020", 2019. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)

44 National News Agency, "President of the Lebanese Delivers Midterm Address," October 31 2019, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/109184/President-of-the-Lebanese-Republic-delivers-mid-term-address>.

45 Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Discriminatory Nationality Law," October 3 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/03/lebanon-discriminatory-nationality-law>.

46 "What does the scene look like in 'One to Persist'," Lebanon 24, November 10 2019, [www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/643763/](http://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/643763/).

كيف يبدو المشهد في أحد الإصرار إليكم التفاصيل فيدي

47 The Kafala system in Lebanon legally binds migrant workers to Lebanese sponsors, providing limited labor rights and increasing risks of exploitation and abuse.

## Governmental support for women's demands and political representation

Women's demands for women's rights and political representation have been met with some support by Lebanese government officials over the past month. On October 26th, prior to the resignation of the Government, Prime Minister Hariri tweeted that any government must include women, who have showed their ability to lead in Lebanon. On October 31, President Aoun, in a speech to the country, conveyed support for women's rights and gender equality. He called for a unified personal status law, and for women's representation in any new governance body. In addition, a number of leaders within government have tweeted in recognition of the positive role of women in the protests. Over the past two months, four female candidates have been discussed within Lebanese media and socio-political discourse to potentially serve as Prime Minister, including Raya El Hassan, Leila Solh-Hamadeh, Halima Kaakour and Bahia Hariri. In addition, there has been some movement within political parties to put forward female leaders speaking on behalf of their parties.



Mothers' march from Achrafieh to khandak Al Ghamih areas- Date 11-30-2019. Copyright Dar al Mussawir

# CONCLUSION



On the 8th day of protests, a young woman on the streets of Beirut- Date 10-24-2019. Copyright Dar al Mussawir

This paper speaks to women carving out and defining new spaces for political engagement and activism, and the mobilization around, and amplification of, their calls for gender justice. In this way, the current protests have created an opportunity to advance women's rights and gender equality in Lebanon.

The paper also speaks to the threats that women's human rights defenders have faced and that may escalate as the situation continues, and the impact of the economic crisis in disrupting gendered roles and norms – which will challenge both men and women, particular the working poor and those with less means to withstanding the impact of the crisis.

As the situation develops, the diverse roles that women are playing, and their demands, must not be erased. While deliberations on formation of the government continue, the representation of women in adequate numbers in government bodies must be prioritized. Any transitional government must respond to women's aspirations and demands for the actualization of equal rights in Lebanon, including through more inclusive institutions and legislative reform (as outlined under the demands section of this paper). Critical to this is the implementation of Lebanon's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security which includes, inter alia, concrete commitments to

gender-responsive legislative reform, and a women's quota across national and municipal structures, including an increase of women in the security sector. In its implementation, recognition should be given to the diversity of women, women's rights actors and their allies, and feminists, that have been present in Lebanon's protests. These new actors and organisations should be nurtured and supported to add to the vibrance of Lebanon's independent civil society actors, including through inter-generational alliances and mentorship relationships between more established Lebanese women's rights and human rights organisations, and those that have found an identify and role through the protests.

Moreover, as the situation continues, its gendered impact and women's engagement must continue to be monitored. In other global contexts, when movements do not succeed or turn violent, persecution and retaliation against activists and women's human rights defenders increases, in a tandem with a roll back on women's rights. Women (and men) must be protected to safely exercise their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly across all sides of the political landscape. In tandem, women peacemaking roles must be recognized, leveraged and amplified as critical immediate actions for peace and security in Lebanon.

**Grounded in the vision of equality enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, UN Women works for the elimination of discrimination against women and girls; the empowerment of women; and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security.**

Placing women's rights at the center of all its efforts, UN Women leads and coordinate United Nations System efforts to ensure that commitments on gender equality and gender mainstreaming translate into action throughout the world. It provides strong and coherent leadership in support of Member States' priorities and efforts, building effective partnerships with civil society and other relevant actors. UN Women Lebanon works on issues of women's political participation, women's peace, and security, women's economic empowerment, and changing social norms around gender and masculinities.



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