

## Reflections about the Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program at the Lebanese American University

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## Faculty and Administration Reflections about the Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program at the Lebanese American University

Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program (TLS) is fully funded by the United States Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The program aims to fortify existing networks in gender studies curriculum and to foster a cross-disciplinary culture of gender mainstreaming in coursework among undergraduate students.

The program's curriculum is led by the Lebanese American University (LAU) School of Arts and Sciences that tailor-made the Gender Series program to meet TLS' objectives. The School of Arts and Sciences at LAU has designed a bespoke program, a Gender Series of courses that consist of multidisciplinary sets of problems relating to national, regional, and global issues around Gender and its manifestations in the social, economic, political, and cultural lives.

The Program allows current LAU students to expand their learning abilities and skills to add knowledge in gender education, activism, and career-building. It provides students with full gender studies coursework which teaches them how to advocate for policy reforms that facilitate democratic transitions, encourages women's participation in different and all sectors of the workforce, and sheds light on inclusive, equitable, and fair gender representation in security, conflict resolution, and peacemaking.

The Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars (TLS) End of Year Conference: "A Tailored Path to Success" last June featured MEPI LAU's TLS undergraduate scholars. As I wrote then to LAU's President Mawad and our funding MEPI-TL agency in Washington DC, "this was one of the most astonishingly impactful events I've witnessed in a long

time. One rarely gets to see, so clearly, the solid consequences of 'money well spent.' These students are now transformed, as are we all." For starters, we are forever grateful to the United States Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which in 2020 launched the Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program (TLS). This

distinctive TLS grant enabled our students, from all undergraduate disciplines, to benefit from coursework in gender equality along with an activist agenda and scholarship opportunities to advance national, regional, and global issues around gender and its manifestations.

So it is with great anticipation that we finalize this issue of LAU's flagship journal *Al-Raida* dedicated to the research of TLS scholars. As envisioned by MEPI TL, LAU acknowledges the importance of highlighting and foregrounding undergraduate scholarship. In collaboration with LAU faculty and the AiW, these student political scientists, biologists, psychologists, engineers, business majors, and others examine topics through a gender lens, producing fresh and rigorous analysis with courageous calls for reform.

As a university that had its 19<sup>th</sup> century origin in the education of women, LAU is committed to advancing the cause of gender equality in Lebanon and across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We are thus proud to showcase here the work of our youth, who undoubtedly will lead us into a more just future.

**Dr. Elise Salem**  
Vice President  
Student Development & Enrollment

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### Doing Gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Gender implicates us all—we live it, we perform it, we re-invent it, we challenge it; some of us reject the notion of a gendered identity altogether. Whatever our relationship to this fluid notion of “gendered identity,” we cannot escape it.

Numerous scholars since time immemorial have reflected on what it means for a person to grow into an assigned gendered identity, or to be socialized into performing the normative gender role that is expected of them. As various societies experienced Enlightenment, and as they divested from the rigid unscientific traditions and beliefs that were imposed on them by hegemonic forces that sought to control the person by way of controlling the whole of society—then, naturally we questioned received knowledge about the seemingly straightforward equation of biological constitution with gender identity.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, our understanding about the fluidity of our gendered identities has been deepening. And we have come to accept that it is neither desirable, nor necessary for any society to rigidly define what a Man is; what a Man does; or what a Woman should do; What a Woman must not do. Humanity has eased itself into understanding that human beings are complex and multifaceted. They thrive when they feel free to express themselves authentically. Human beings are not robots—they cannot exist in specific pre-defined terms, and they naturally resist prescribed behavior. This is true in our relationship to political autocracy as much as it is real in our relationship to our bodies.

Once we realize that we are born neither as Men nor as Women; That we work at becoming an individual on a spectrum which has the categories of “Man” and “Woman” as extreme identities; That each of one us exists somewhere on that spectrum and that we are all free to perform our identities according to our authentic sense of self; Once this realization is made, then we naturally look around us, and we begin to question rigidly-enforced social and political practices that we have received and are

expected to follow unquestioningly. Consequently, when we do gender, we do politics.

A critical aspect of politics is leadership. What leadership opportunities are open to those who “do politics” as they “do gender”—with an open, receptive, accepting, agile, malleable mindset? The world craves strong leadership. All over the world, people have been suffering from leaders who have failed to show courage to face the threats of the global pandemic; leaders who have resisted adapting to the exigencies of the ever-changing technological space; and leaders who have perpetuated antiquated, irrelevant, and ineffectual legacies that they blindly inherited.

We need brave leaders—those who lead while acknowledging that power, like gendered identity, exists on a continuum. It was Andrew J. Harrison who differentiated between “old-style leadership” and “new-paradigm leadership” (2016) when he explained that the old ways of “Formal authority, Coercive power, Autocratic practices” and full reliance on The Leader to make decisions are no longer productive.

Rather he demonstrated that when leaders inspire through their personality and their abilities to influence through “credibility, rational persuasion, participatory decision-making” then a system will function “with or without the leader.” Leaders should know when assertiveness is warranted and when negotiations are needed. The continuum here entails positioning yourself between the rigid “old-style leadership” and the “new-paradigm leadership”—the secret lies in the balance.

MEPI students have been challenged to engage with “doing gender” and to take on a leading role in understanding themselves, and the societies in which they will live and work. They have been tasked with examining their perspectives on theirs and others’ gendered identities, and they have produced original and engaging responses that capture these intellectual endeavors. As you read through these fascinating submissions, consider these young leaders who are undertaking the challenging task of negotiating gender and leadership on a continuum. These future leaders give us hope that the next generation will characterize itself by being inquisitive,

mindful of diversity, cautious of homogeneity, aspiring towards intersectionality in all of its decisions, and continually promoting the value of the individual over all other considerations.

I hope that you will find in these next pages signs of hope that the generation of scholars who will begin to influence our society, our culture, and our politics, is a generation of leaders and change-makers.

***Dr. Cathia Jenainati***  
*Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences*

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When LAU received the confirmation of funding for the MEPI TLS program in July 2020, we had barely six weeks to plan for the application, selection, and admission process for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. While dealing with a global pandemic, an economic collapse, and the explosion at the port of Beirut, LAU was beyond proud to have been able to select more than 270 high achieving, excellent students from the different LAU schools and disciplines to embark on their first-ever MEPI TLS journey at LAU in fall 2020.

Academic year 2020/2021 was among the most challenging years in Lebanon, but thanks to the generous MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders funding, TLS provided an opportunity for hundreds of LAU students to continue their education while diving into the field of gender studies. The program proved to be an eye-opener for our students. The impact it had on their gender understanding was beyond our initial expectations. Our TLS students became passionate advocates for gender equality and joined many initiatives while a part of the program in order to advance gender equality within LAU and beyond.

This would have not been possible without the dedication and support of MEPI, the LAU community, the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, and most importantly the fearless LAU TL team that went above and beyond the call of duty to make this happen.

I would like to recognize dear colleagues who made this happen namely Mr. Abdo Ghie, AVP/EM; Ms. Ghada Fares, FASO Director; Ms. Myriam Sfeir, Director of the AiW; Dr. Lina Kreidie, TLS Director; Dr. Jennifer Skulte-

Ouaiss, TL Gender Expert; and Ms. Jessica Boueiry, TLS Assistant Coordinator.

To our TLS students, I would like to say that you were an inspiration to all of us in our darkest times. Keep on shining and standing up for the cause of equity, diversity, and inclusion!

*Dina Abdul Rahman*  
*Executive Director, MEPI TL Program*

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### **A Major Stride Going Forward**

The United States Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative for Tomorrow's Leaders Scholars (MEPI TLS) opened the door for students to discuss what are often considered to be "taboo" subjects here in the region. The MENA region's religious, ethnic, and racial diversity has been cursed by authoritarian power dynamics, unfair competition over natural resources, political instability, and war, all of which has been compounded by gender inequality.

The MENA region is a complex web of riddles that needs to be unraveled, dismantled, reformed, and better rebuilt. This is the

vision of MEPI TLS: to establish liberal values and democracy with gender equality at its core. The MEPI TLS mission is to stimulate Lebanese youth, and to provide them with knowledge that empowers them to advocate for positive and transformative social change. The goal is that all people, irrespective of their background, have equal rights and similar access to opportunities in all sectors of life, including among others education, workplace, media, and politics.

The MEPI TLS liberal values of inclusion, diversity, and democracy align with LAU's educational values. The LAU MEPI team of faculty, staff, and activists joined hands in designing a student-based curriculum that meets the current needs and challenges of the students, provides them with the necessary knowledge, and empowers them with the essential skills to transform themselves from passive and reactive subjects to proactive citizens.

The success of the first year of the MEPI TLS program reflects the continuous support of the U.S. MEPI staff and gender expert. The program's success is also a reflection of the LAU MEPI team's collaborative spirit. The list

of people who deserve recognition here include the LAU president, the VP for Student Development, the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, the LAU Grants Director, the financial aid office, the MEPI TL executive director and gender expert, the Chair and staff of the Social Science Department, the LAU writing center tutors and staff, and all other school advisors who have supported MEPI TLS students over the past year. Special thanks goes to the AiW, whose knowledge in the field of gender equality and women's rights supported the MEPI TLS program and our students. Lastly, I would like to commend the MEPI TLS students themselves, who worked hard over the past year to strengthen their advocacy skills and expand their knowledge about gender equality in order to pave the way for a successful, peaceful, and bright future for themselves, their communities, and their countries. YES! They proved to be today's and tomorrow's leaders.

The achievements of the first MEPI TLS cohort culminated in an end of the year conference, where students showcased their work. They focused on a variety of issues,

including the best practices that bridge gender gaps at the workplace; gender mainstreaming in education; women's bodily autonomy and the bodily autonomy of other marginalized groups; and feminist foreign policy and international affairs.

This issue of *Al-Raida* recognizes the work of our MEPI TLS students over the past year, and we are grateful for the effort of *Al-Raida's* editorial team.

Proudly, and in my capacity as the academic director, I humbly brag that with the support of the MEPI TLS team and students, we all proved to be strong and courageous. We have faced all the challenges of 2020 and 2021—social, economic, and political, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic—and succeeded with flying colors. Our MEPI TLS alumni will shine in their future endeavors.

Lastly, I have a little confession: I am not a gender expert by training. I am, however, a full-hearted advocate for gender equality. As a woman, I have faced many of the challenges that our MEPI TLS students learned about over the course of this past

semester. However, with the support of my own MEPI TLS students and the MEPI TLS program, I can now say that I have turned these experiences into the foundations of my work as a gender educator.

And for that reason, I would like to thank our MEPI TLS students for allowing me to share my personal knowledge and experiences, and for allowing me to learn from them that a future where gender equity and equality includes women and all marginalized groups is near.

***Dr. Lina Haddad Kreidie***  
*Visiting Assistant Professor*  
*MEPI-TLS Academic Director*

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I jumped into the MEPI TLS program as the Gender Expert at the end of the summer of 2021. However, I was not totally new to the program as I had just taught the TLS-designed course, Gender Equality in the Workplace, in the spring. I knew from the start that great students were (rightly!) the focus of the MEPI TL programs and that this was no less true for the newest program, the MEPI TL Gender Scholars.



While great students will generally do well in most situations, the activist focus of the MEPI TLS program sets the bar high. In addition to excelling in their diverse majors, TLS students need to apply outside the classroom what they are learning about gender in the classroom. MEPI TLS is not a passive learning experience. This type of “learning by doing” is so much needed in today’s world, particularly in the Middle East and most particularly in Lebanon. The multiple and intersecting crises that our world is facing demand thoughtful and creative insights and lots of hard work. Today’s students must be leaders now, as well as in the future. There is a critical need in our world today for new voices and new leaders. Therefore, MEPI TLS students at LAU are learning how to analyze and address problems through a gender lens.

This gender lens is new to most of the MEPI TLS students, and it helps them to see the world from a variety of perspectives. Often, I find that I do best in my role as Gender Expert by modeling the analytical and problem-solving behavior that I hope to see in the MEPI TLS students. Drawing on my training as

a political scientist, I try to get students to understand gender as a spectrum and not as a synonym for “adding” women and girls. More importantly, I describe how one way that gender can be understood is as a set of power relationships. Sharing with MEPI TLS students how I manage my various roles at LAU—in addition to Gender Expert, Director of the Title IX Office, Instructor, and Mentor—I am able to model pushing beyond being gender blind to recognizing that gender affects all aspects of our lives and needs to be recognized. Gender needs to be made visible in how we describe and understand the world.

Indeed, this is why the U.S.-funded MEPI TLS program is so critical. There is so much work to do to make our region a place where all can participate in decision making about our joint futures. We can no longer limit leadership to men, especially those who fit narrow definitions about what “real” leaders are like. Globally, research and practice demonstrate that this type of leader is failing us far too often. We need to broaden our definition of who is and who can be a good leader to include not only women but also

members of the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as all genders from ethnic/national/religious minorities and lower socio-economic classes. We also need to give young people the skills as well as the experience that will help them to be good leaders.

While the challenges are daunting, students—such as those whose work is included in this special issue— give me hope that new perspectives, new approaches, and new solutions can come out of looking at the world through a gender lens. These MEPI TLS students are already taking on the responsibilities of leadership through critiquing what is and articulating what could be a better future. They are actively envisioning and building a future that includes ALL of us.

***Dr. Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss***

*Gender Expert for the MEPI-TL programs*  
*Founding Director of the Title IX Office at LAU*

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## MEPI Student Reflections

Being part of MEPI's Tomorrow's Leaders program has taught me critical information and has given me important skills that I will use every day. I learned that in order to achieve gender equality, we have to change our ideologies and mindset. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture." This quote reminds me that we are responsible for changing our current reality. Men are not the only ones who should be blamed: we all play a part in upholding this oppressive structure. Education, including the education I received through the MEPI TL program, plays an important role in changing this system.

I learned so much from the articles and videos we discussed in class. Now, I am able to support my ideas with facts from credible sources. Before registering for the MEPI course, I did not have the confidence to articulate my thoughts about issues like

gender inequality. However, the debates and presentations I participated in during class have given me the confidence to voice my ideas and thoughts. It is my responsibility to advocate for my rights, and the confidence I learned as part of the MEPI TL program allows me to do just that.

*Dina Arkahdan*

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Over the past two semesters, I had the privilege of participating in the MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars program. This program helped me to develop a well-defined gender perspective. Most importantly, the information I learned in my classes allows me to see women's issues in every aspect of life and not just in certain sectors

Since a young age, I have always seen myself as a feminist. However, it is truly very difficult to be a feminist in a society where toxic masculinity dominates. For instance, even though young girls in Lebanon are encouraged to pursue their education, these expectations change as they grow older. As adults, they are instead expected to get

married and raise children and put their families and marital duties above everything else. In other words, they are asked to give up their independence.

Gender equality should be achieved in three main categories: social, political, and economic. No society will ever be successful without the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of public and private life. Therefore, one cannot advocate for human rights without also advocating for women's rights. Gender inequality is clearly a violation of basic human rights.

In addition to coursework, the workshops and seminars that were organized for MEPI students by the Arab Institute for Women at LAU were very beneficial. These introduced us to the struggles of feminist activists in different fields, and they showed us the ways that feminist theory can be used outside of the classroom. Finally, I also enjoyed the gue

Finally, what I enjoyed the most were the guest speakers who participating in our classroom meetings.

To conclude, being part of the MEPI TL program has made me realize the importance of being a feminist in Lebanon. The MEPI program is an important part of changing society's views about gender equality, and it can help to mobilize a younger generation of feminist activists.

***Rebecca Bou Younes***

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It all started with an email that I received in the summer of 2020. I was both nervous and excited as I filled out the application for the MEPI TL scholarship. The day I received my acceptance letter was a life changing moment. The program was exceptional: not only did it grant students a scholarship, but it gave them the opportunity to join an active community of gender scholars on campus, to take professional workshops, and to participate in leadership events. The first course I took as part of the program, "Fundamentals of Gender Discrimination," introduced me to the different types of discrimination facing women around the world. My second course, "Gender Inequality in the Workplace," gave me the opportunity

to learn new things and to do my own research on a subject of my preference.

This program taught me how to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds, which has prepared me for my own future. This program has opened many doors for me and has encouraged me to fight for gender equality. All I can say in the end is that I am thankful to have had the chance to participate in this program.

*Chloe El Agha*

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The MEPI TL program taught me just how expansive the issue of gender inequality actually is. Before this program, I wasn't aware of how much gender inequality existed in our society. Almost all women, members of the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized groups are being mistreated and discriminated against. There are many harmful and negative consequences of gender discrimination. Through online lectures, projects, and activities, the MEPI TL program taught me about these consequences and the experiences of those facing gender discrimination.

During the fall semester, the MEPI TL program gave me the opportunity to meet Ms. Zeina Akar, who is the Lebanese Minister of Defense. During the meeting, we discussed Ms. Akar's experiences of gender discrimination after her appointment to the Ministry of Defense. We also discussed how she responded to this discrimination. Specifically, she explained how toxic masculinity and patriarchy perpetuated gender discrimination in her line of work. In addition, I was also able to meet Ms. Paula Yacoubian. During our discussion, Ms. Yacoubian addressed the importance of including women in politics, and the policies that could be implemented in order to increase the number of women.

During the spring, I took the course Topics in Political Science: Gender Equality in Negotiation, Mediation, and Conflict Resolution to learn more about gender discrimination in politics. I learned how important it is for women politicians to be present at the decision-making table, regardless of their political, social, ethnic, or cultural background. Women at the decision-making table can disrupt gender stereotypes

and norms. From the debates that we had during this class, I learned how women are essential and vital for effective and sustainable results.

The MEPI TL program had a huge impact on me and has given me lessons and skills that I will use in my everyday life.

***Said Fawaz***

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The MEPI TL program was a rewarding and fruitful experience for me. The program opened my eyes to gender discrimination and allowed me to understand this discrimination in new ways. The program also allowed me to interact with many brilliant people working in the field of women's and gender rights.

In addition to course material, I learned a lot from the webinars that were held over the course of the program. Each webinar introduced us to speakers with different views of the current status of women's and gender rights, both in Lebanon and around the world. These webinars covered the subjects of gender inequality and the

pandemic, women's rights in the workplace, and women and domestic labor. My respect and gratitude for women grew by the day as I learned about the struggles they face in their lives every day.

The MEPI TL program made me realize that I, like many other people, have certain unconscious biases concerning women. For example, in physical education or gym classes, I don't expect my female classmates to perform as well as I did. However, they could outperform me! But unfortunately, gender stereotypes have made them believe that men are tougher and stronger than women. The MEPI TL program helped me to challenge these internal biases.

In the end, I am extremely grateful and very proud to have been part of this program. I look forward to applying what I have learned my amazing instructors and the different speakers in my life.

***Karim Kassem***

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As a pre-med student who aspires to work in the healthcare sector, I have always wanted to combat gender inequality. This is because society continues to categorize the medical field as a “male” field. Gender stereotypes often portray women doctors as inferior to men, or not as smart. Additionally, female students are often discouraged from entering the medical field.

Accordingly, when I got the chance to join the MEPI TL program, I was so excited. Moreover, the program absolutely exceeded my expectations.

During the first semester, I was able to extend my preliminary knowledge about gender inequality and discrimination. The case studies we reviewed in class, the webinars we attended, and the people we met all rendered this experience a rather unforgettable one.

In the second semester, I was able to take a course on gender discrimination in politics. The thing I liked most about this class was the fact that I got introduced to so many new and

important issues that I was unfamiliar with. Today, I can better comprehend the world of politics and the atrocities that continue to happen because of the new knowledge I gained through my MEPI TL courses. Additionally, I am also more aware of the work that is being done to challenge gender discrimination and to dismantle the system of gender inequality.

Today, I see things from a new perspective—the MEPI TL courses enhanced my knowledge of gender inequality and also fueled my desire to fight change. Before the MEPI TL program, I was a bit lost. I did not know where to start my fight against gender inequality. Now, I am more prepared and I am more knowledgeable. I know how crucial gender equality is, and how much recognition it deserves in the fight for human rights around the world. This is all because of the MEPI TL program.

In general, this program changed me. I believe it also changed my classmates. It introduced us to experts in the field and broadened our knowledge, equipping us to fight for gender equality. The program taught us how to make our voices heard. Overall, the

program was a great experience and I recommend it to everyone!

***Yara Matar***

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I had a great experience as a MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders student. The gender studies courses that I took taught me even more than I expected. Before this program, I never really thought about the severity of gender discrimination. I also didn't know how many people experienced gender discrimination.

Why is this such an important research area? Gender studies is important because sex, love, caring, and reproduction are fundamental aspects of life. Gender studies provides politically relevant and empirical information regarding gendered activities, norms, and discourses. Gender, sexual diversity, masculinity, and femininity are all topics that we studied as part of the MEPI TL program. We learned that gender intersects

with race/ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and other identity categories. Our world should be free of gender discrimination, and all genders must be treated equally. We learned that gender equality protects women and girls from abuse, and that gender equality is also necessary for economic growth. We also learned that women and men are valued equally in societies that are safe and healthy. For these reasons and many others, gender equality is a critical human right.

As a result of my experiences as a MEPI TL student, I now realize that our world needs gender studies. We need to raise awareness about the forms of gender discrimination that affect women and other marginalized groups in their everyday lives. We must learn to treat all people equally, irrespective of their gender. I am very proud to have been a MEPI Tomorrow's Leaders student.

***Omar Tannir***



## How Gender Studies can change your perspective: Seeing through a gender sensitive lens

Sara El Koussa

Although I am the only girl in my family, I never felt different. My brothers and I were raised equally. We all eat the same, we all do the same chores, we all go to the same school, and we all do the same after-school activities. We were also encouraged to chase our dreams and to pursue our passions. As a result, I was convinced that women had achieved a lot, and that we were nearly equal to men. Angelina Jolie is all over the media, and Angela Merkel outshines the actual president. Most importantly, my brothers do the dishes!

So, when my younger brother frowned at his friend's Instagram story that called for women's rights, I asked him why he responded in that manner. I had no idea what to tell him when he asked: "what more is there to ask for?" I have always considered myself a women's rights activist. However, I had a hard time answering the question. I started to wonder. Did we really need a women's quota? That seemed unfair to men. And the gender wage gap? Well, my uncle's wife, who has a senior position in her company, earns more than my uncle. So the gender wage gap can't really be *that* bad, can it? During our conversation, my brothers even suggested that at some point, they will need to fight for men's rights because women will just "take over." I laughed. Maybe someday?

As a result, when I joined my first gender studies course as part of the MEPI TLS program, I was honestly skeptical. What more is there to learn about? The courses will probably just focus on a few small things that we still have to fix. They will also probably discuss sexual harassment, since this has been a growing trend in the media, but is there anything else?

This is where everything changed. The courses, the readings, the workshops, the webinars, and my volunteering made me see things differently. They made me see what was hidden in discussions between friends and family. They made me understand with numbers and statistics and case studies. We are far, so far, from celebrating gender equality.

Before my MEPI TLS courses, I did not understand the true extent of domestic abuse and the gender discrimination that prevents women from seeking help after they have experienced violence. For example, abused women often don't leave their domestic situation out of fear of retaliation. Some have confused thoughts and self-blame. For example, the husband or the husband's family might blame her for enraging him, which is why he hit her. In other words, it's her fault. In the end, she is convinced that things will get better if she changes herself, or makes herself "better." There's also the issue of financial dependency. Gender norms and stereotypes dictate that finances are a man's responsibility, and that women and girls should not be involved. This has disastrous effects for women who are suddenly forced to abandon their households because of domestic violence. How will she survive financially? (Whiting, 2016). I also learned that many victims of domestic violence stay in their households in order to remain with their children. In Lebanon, where custody battles are determined in religious courts, the age of custody changes, and women are often stripped of their custody rights by a legal system that favors men. Finally, some women fear the social stigmas that accompany a divorced woman. She would be called a divorcee. Do you know what that means? She would be the highlight of every morning gathering for the upcoming weeks and months. Maybe even years... She would be looked at differently. She will disappoint her family. She will be asked rude and intrusive questions, such as "how could you not think of the children?" and "what if you tried harder?" The fear of not getting married again would take over. What will she do? Stay in her parents' home and die from old age all alone!?

If the victim was able to overcome all of these issues, she would only come face-to-face with the long and complicated process of divorce. So, no. It is not as simple as "just leaving." She has a lot to consider. A lot to go through. And if she doesn't have the proper support system, it will break her.

Similarly, my MEPI TLS courses taught me to challenge normative stereotypes surrounding sexual violence. No, the blame should not be on the girl. Our first reaction should change from “why was she walking there alone” to “how could he think he has the right to do that!” A MEPI webinar with Christina Lamb, who discussed her book *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields*, opened my eyes even further. Sexual violence doesn’t only happen in dim streets. There are still sex slaves. There is still human and sex trafficking. Women are sold on black markets. One girl that Lamb interviewed was sexually abused by twelve different people. There are places in the world where women are still treated as property, as sexual objects, and as subordinates to men.

This made me ask what happened to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform, and U.N. Resolution 1325? Aren’t these frameworks supposed to protect women and girls? I used one of my final papers to try and answer this question. The things I learned and the case studies I read changed how I viewed countries, laws, and life. For example, I learned the story of 16-year-old Noura Hussein, who was forced into child marriage and raped by her husband with the help of his cousins. She was later imprisoned for killing her husband, and was consequently disowned by her family. She was later sentenced to death for her “crime.” Worse, these events happened recently, in 2018 (OHCHR, 2018).

I learned that the reactions of her community and her family are rooted in dangerous gender stereotypes. This became even more evident during an argument where I tried to convince my uncle that marital rape exists. Ultimately, these stereotypes become even more dangerous when manifested by those in powerful positions, like judges.

Noura’s case is not exceptional. Unfortunately, many women are victims of the same story. However, I also learned that men and boys can also experience sexual violence. However, we do not talk about it. Gender stereotypes make it hard for us to think about men and boys as possible victims.

In my MEPI TLS courses, I also learned about the importance of gender quotas and the glass ceiling, which is an invisible barrier composed of gender stereotypes and discrimination that prevents women from advancing to senior level positions in their jobs and in the political sphere. Whereas before, I used to see my uncle's wife as the norm, I realize now that her success is the exception. Relatedly, at a webinar that I participated in as part of an internship program, speakers spoke about how the institution fosters the growth, development, and flourishing of women. They were proud to announce that the percentage of women in seniority positions is around 20%. I was shocked! 20%! An international institution! However, I learned from the MEPI TLS program that 20% is actually considered a success (TEDx Talks, 2016).

The examples I've listed here are just the tip of the iceberg. Now, I pick up on things quicker. For instance, the Libanpost man always triple checks that I will deliver the documents to my father. I realize now that this isn't done as a precaution, but rather he does this because I am a girl whom he thinks is incapable of handling such important matters.

The MEPI TLS program made it possible to meet feminists from around the world, and to learn about feminist activism in different sectors. Webinar speakers were particularly interesting. I especially enjoyed listening to Christina Lamb and a feminist political negotiator from Ireland.

Now, I know where to look for information when I want to, and how to choose the speakers I listen to. After this experience, my interest in gender and anthropology has grown. I even enjoy movies more! *Enola Homes* now has a different meaning to me because I relate to the feminist movement, and try to link it to the issues we discussed in class. Most importantly, when my brother asks me again about the women's rights movement, I can respond properly. Our home is a haven that not all women have. However, even my family was in shock when I told them about the various types of gender discrimination and inequality we were learning about in class. They were unable to accept that all of this continues to happen today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So no, we have not yet achieved gender equality. There's still a long way to go in order to eliminate gender discrimination from laws and institutions. Women's rights are a matter of national security. They are not just a "woman's issue." It is not enough to say we want change, but we need to outline exactly how we want to accomplish that. We have to be more aware, more cautious, and more vigilant. We need to see the world from a more gender sensitive lens, the lens that I now see through.

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