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The Gender Agenda of Civil Society Organizations in Lebanon: Intervention Constraints and the Absence of Cooperation and Action

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Abstract

Lebanon's vibrant civil society has shaped different aspects of the country's political, economic, and social landscape. This paper aims to explore two main constraints obstructing the efficacy of local CSOs working on issues related to gender and women's rights. The first constraint is the polarization between CSOs, and the second is the absence of networking and cooperation. The paper's main recommendations for CSOs highlight the importance of strengthening cooperation between CSOs themselves, and between CSOs and the government. As for the state, the paper's recommendations focus on how to create a bridge of cooperation with CSOs that are committed to action. Finally, the paper emphasizes that a strong, centralized agenda to gender and women's rights can facilitate the coordination between and the efficacy of CSOs working to promote gender equality in Lebanon.

Key Words: Gender, Women, Intervention, Policies, CSOs, Government

Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Lebanon are a driving force in the fight against gender discrimination and inequality. Lebanon's poor ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index—145 out of 153 countries—is reflected in the large number of CSOs in the country

dedicated solely to issues of gender inequality and women's rights. The critical influence of these local CSOs on gender inequality makes them critical actors in the field of gender equality; it is thus important to assess and evaluate their approaches to gender equality and the efficacy of these approaches.

The latest data on the number of registered CSOs in Lebanon as of 2014 show that over 8,000 organizations currently operate in Lebanon: 62% of these CSOs operate at the national level, while the rest operate at the community level. Further, 40 % of beneficiaries of CSO programming are women (Beyond Reform and Development [BRD], 2015). This huge number, which we can expect to have increased after the Beirut port explosion and the worsening economic crisis, highlights the importance of the work done by CSOs. Importantly, many of these organizations work specifically on issues of gender and women's rights, including well-known organizations like ABAAD, KAFA, HELEM, SHIELD, MOSAIC, Seeds for Legal Initiatives, FE-MALE, Dar Al Amal, Arab Institute for Women, RDFL, CeSSRA, Haven for Artists, and many others.

The large number of organizations working on issues related to gender inequality and women's rights means that there is a large spectrum along which CSOs define what counts as "gender equality," and how organizations believe that this goal can be achieved. At one end of this spectrum is the achievement of full gender equality at all levels of society, including in politics. Some CSOs have chosen to fight for gender equality in certain sectors only, for example political rights, while others have chosen to focus on shifting societal attitudes toward gender as a way of eventually ensuring gender equality. The variegated approaches used by CSOs to attain gender equality, and the different understandings of what are the best strategies to achieve it, have made the actual goal of achieving full gender equality ultimately

quite difficult. How can we achieve gender equality if CSOs and other actors do not actually agree on the best methods for achieving equality? What does this mean for the work of local CSOs in practice? These are the questions that are at the heart of this paper.

CSOs working on gender issues in Lebanon face various barriers. Despite their continuous efforts to thrive amidst the dreadful financial and political crises in Lebanon, their efforts to promote gender equality are driven backward by several constraints. The first constraint that this paper presents is the lack of a unified agenda driving the work of CSOs focused on gender inequality. The second constraint facing these CSOs is the absence of a constructive network of cooperation with formal government institutions which should be supporting this work. After discussing the implications of these constraints, the paper will present some recommendations for both CSOs and for government institutions to enhance their approach toward gender equality, gender mainstreaming, and women's political and socio-economic empowerment.

Separate Agendas, Separate Ideas: The Lack of a Unified Strategy Among Gender CSOs

Cooperation, networking, and engagement in any field makes actions and results more structured and efficient. Similarly, if CSOs in Lebanon could set similar priorities in their work on women's rights and gender equality, they could accelerate their goals and make results more sustainable and efficient. The fact that gender issues are "divided" into certain sub-focuses presents an important barrier to collective work and organizing. For example, the number of organizations focusing on the LGBTQ+ community is minimal compared to the ones working on women's rights issues more broadly. Similarly, there are fewer organizations working on women's political participation than there are organizations working on gender-based violence (GBV). Thus, it is important to ask what could happen if all CSOs in Lebanon

shared the same vision and approach towards women's and gender issues, and what gains could be achieved from this unity or solidarity.

The lack of cooperation between CSOs working on gender and women's rights issues might also be tied to the lack of an organizing structure at the national level. Such an organization can help put actors in touch with each other and can give organizations more information about what they are working on (Lebanese Humanitarian and Development Forum [HDF], 2022). A report by the UNDP highlights that there is no directory for gender actors in Lebanon which facilitates access to their work, publications, announcements, and other important issues (UNDP & CRI, 2006). In addition, a mapping of 75 gender actors done by the Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action (CeSSRA) shows that 65 of these actors are in the capital Beirut, while the rest (10 actors) are spread over three other districts (CeSSRA, 2020). Their geographical concentration in Beirut compared to their relative lack across the rest of the country presents another limitation to the work of gender CSOs in Lebanon (CeSSRA, 2020).

A unified agenda for CSOs means that their programmatic interventions would not overlap or duplicate another CSO's work. Knowing what the main priorities are in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment eases the work of CSOs, directs their focus, and structures their approach. This unified agenda can take the form of a national strategy; a national strategy does exist in Lebanon but is not implemented. In fact, two national strategies exist, one focused on women's rights and the other on GBV. The GBV national strategy plan was established by the Office of the Minister of State for Women's Affairs (OMSWA), and it only tackles GBV (ABAAD, 2020). The OMSWA aimed to work closely with

civil society actors to implement this national strategy plan, but its work has gradually diminished ever since its establishment (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2020).

A National Action Plan (NAP) on women, peace, and security was also created in Lebanon and endorsed by different stakeholders from government institutions to civil society, and others. This NAP was based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (UN Women, 2019). The aim of this NAP was to create a structured plan to enhance women's political and social participation, representation, and inclusion. Interestingly, this NAP was established with the help of only three CSOs, which is a very small number compared to the number of CSOs working on gender inequality in the country. The NAP also proposed only one suggestion on advancing networking and cooperation between civil society and the government. The NAP suggests that there should be a platform, or a portal enabling leaders in the civil society to communicate and partner with women parliamentarians (National Commission for Lebanese Women [NCLW], 2019). There are, however, a few important gaps in this proposal, including the limited political will to implement this strategy.

While these two national strategies are important, focusing on GBV or women's social and political empowerment as separate issues are only piecemeal strategies for fighting gender inequality. Instead, CSOs should consider promoting a unified national plan that foregrounds several simultaneous and equally important goals as part of a holistic plan to fight against gender inequality.

Another potential reason for the lack of a unified agenda among gender CSOs is related to financial donors. CSOs primarily operate through the funding they receive from international donors. The findings of an assessment done on the needs of nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon highlights that donor funding does more than just provide cash: It also forms and structures the full governance of the organization, which includes the mission, vision, and basic guidelines or policies (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009). Knowing that the financial resources of nearly all CSOs are from international donors, it can be deduced that the priorities and objectives of an organization rely heavily on what the donors want or ask from the recipients of their funds.

Networking and cooperation between CSOs could ultimately alter the quest for gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Setting out similar priorities between gender actors can make the process of achieving gender equality more sustainable and more effective. A solid example of this is the first ever feminist civil society platform created by civil society actors and activists in Lebanon after the Beirut port explosion in 2020 with the help of UN Women. The Feminist Civil Society Platform (LFSCP) includes 50 members, and its main aim is to consolidate the status of women in different sectors and fields. The platform succeeded in convening different signatories to bring up important concerns about the status of women to the forefront of civil society debates. The most recent demands by the members of this platform were about the underrepresentation of women in government institutions, notably as the general elections were approaching in Lebanon. A statement by the signatories also affirms that they will monitor and hold accountable any unequitable and unjust approaches toward women in the political realm (LFSCP, 2021). Again, it can be argued that once gender actors work collaboratively and unify their demands, their efforts may have a far-reaching impact on the government and on society more broadly. The feminist platform is a great pathway towards a more unified gender agenda; however, if its members will not

integrate or revisit their own approaches to gender issues, the platform will become ineffective.

The Absence of Networking and Collaboration between CSOs and the Government

The long history of civil society actors in Lebanon makes them important stakeholders in relatively all aspects of the social, political, and economic arenas of the Lebanese state. Nonetheless, the Lebanese government seems to primarily depend on CSOs to achieve certain goals, rather than choosing to work with CSOs as collaborators. While networks and points of contact do exist between the government and CSOs, their existence is primarily rhetorical and often does not amount to concrete action or policy. Further, government funding of CSOs, particularly those working on gender, is lacking, which exacerbates any forms of cooperation and communication between the two stakeholders and increases dependency on international donors (AbouAssi, 2019).

In 1998, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) was established and was endorsed by the Council of Ministers. This was the first ever official entity to represent the fight for women's empowerment in the government, and it serves as the country's official national women's machinery (NCLW, 2022). The main objectives of this institution include creating equal opportunities for men and women to prosper in Lebanese society, and to mainstream gender in public institutions across Lebanon. NCLW mainly works with inter-governmental organizations and UN agencies and is not seen to have adequate networking with local CSOs. This makes it even harder for CSOs to build close relations with government institutions and it denies them the chance to interact and coordinate with other stakeholders. The role of NCLW is very critical for the work of CSOs on gender and women's rights. Thus, fostering effective partnerships and coordination between the two stakeholders

should be a primary focus for CSOs. In other words, a strong working relationship between NCLW and local gender CSOs is key to fighting for gender equality in a sustainable way.

Various laws still exist in Lebanon that block gender equality and women's empowerment. Among these laws are the personal status laws, labor laws, the national social security law, the nationality law, and others. To challenge these laws, networking between CSOs and the government is needed. CSOs have done ample research, projects, and programs concerning these laws. However, due to the lack of constructive government connectivity and cooperation, the efforts of these CSOs often go unacknowledged by the government. For this reason, among others, stakeholders must work together and cooperate closely to improve the status of women, and to codify gender equality. A strong working relationship between gender CSOs and government actors can facilitate this work and can help to keep gender inequality on the agendas of various government actors.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The quest for gender equality and women's rights in Lebanon begins at the local level. CSOs have been continuously working on providing women and gender minorities in Lebanon the opportunity to voice their concerns and to participate equitably in society. For this, assessing and evaluating the extent to which CSOs are properly working on gender issues requires rethinking their agendas and unifying them into one focused agenda. Furthermore, for the work of these CSOs to be legitimized and translated into policymaking, cooperation and networking with the government must be reinforced and nourished.

For CSOs to establish a more holistic and unified agenda which sets out their main priorities related to gender and women's rights issues, this article suggests the following recommendations:

- Establishing a yearly forum for CSOs which only involves organizations that work on issues related to gender and/or women's rights. The aim of this forum would be to articulate a unified agenda among these actors, which could be updated each year based on the different challenges and circumstances faced by these actors.
- CSOs must work closely on addressing the issue of their locations and who their beneficiaries are. Knowing that nearly all CSOs operate in specific districts and locations, and that this dictates the extent of their influence, CSOs must adopt a strategy that targets beneficiaries in their areas of operation and in districts where access to CSOs working on gender equality has been limited. They could open temporary offices, implement projects, and network with existing CSOs in those districts that may help them work toward gender equality.
- CSOs should lobby for the implementation of the NAP and provide evidence-based knowledge and reviews on its effectiveness and limitations on a yearly basis.
- CSOs must adopt new approaches with the donor community that limit their influence on how gender programs and projects should be implemented and who the beneficiaries of these programs should be, in order to ensure that local needs are met and responded to. This approach must be shared by all CSOs to prevent the duplication of work and program interventions.

For the government and its respective institutions, the below recommendations are presented concerning strengthening the ties between civil society and government actors on issues related to gender and women's rights:

- Government financing of CSOs working on gender and/or women's rights must increase. This can alter the dynamics of dependency on the international community for aid and could also create new forms of cooperation between the government and local actors.
- The government should modify the current NAP and add to it a new detailed section that deals with civil society cooperation.
- The NCLW should strengthen its ties with CSOs and should aim to collaborate more often with programs and projects that require full-scale engagement from all gender stakeholders or actors in Lebanon.

Civil society in Lebanon has been and remains a key player in the fields of human rights, gender equality, humanitarianism, refugees, education, development, health, and so much more. As a result, shedding light on the dynamics of CSOs in Lebanon is important to better understand how they contribute to enhancing gender norms and what their limitations are. This paper only addressed two of the limitations and challenges obstructing CSOs, but there remain other challenges that require exploration. While this paper relied on existing research and different observations made on the work of CSOs on gender equality and women's rights in Lebanon, future research should include primary data collection, which requires interviewing CSO employees and exploring their relationship with other local actors on this specific subject matter.

The elimination of gender gaps in Lebanon requires the full cooperation of all stakeholders, specifically government actors and civil society groups. CSOs on their own cannot alter the status quo and change discourses on gender. The limitations and challenges that CSOs face on a legal and institutional level are impeding their progress and making it almost impossible to achieve their goal of gender equality in Lebanon. Building a unified agenda and strengthening collaboration between CSOs and government actors are two key strategies for advancing the fight against gender inequality in Lebanon.

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