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## **KIP Research Project**

# **Sectarian Power-sharing and Women's Political Representation: A Lebanese Oxymoron or an Opportunity?**

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## Executive Summary

This project led by Carmen Geha (Principal Investigator) at the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration focused on Lebanese women's political representation. The emerging findings of this 10-month research project carry both theoretical and practical implications on the role of Lebanese women in politics. Representation of women here is defined as women having access to office as a seat in either legislative or executive branches, or what Hogstrom (2012) refers to as representation in 'national politics.'<sup>1</sup> This report explains the methodology, presents key findings, and proposes recommendations for future research as well as for policy-making.

The report is comprised of four parts. The first section is an overview of activities undertaken throughout the project duration. The second section focuses on the methodological framework and data collection tools. The third section presents key findings and empirical insights. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations for future research and policy. Although this research is not policy orientated, several research participants shared ideas from their experience on how to possibly improve the approach to policy-making on women's rights in Lebanon.

The objectives of this research were a) to identify whether Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system affects the representation of women in politics, b) to unpack the ways in which power-sharing system favor men and challenge the representation of women in national political institutions, and c) explain what is *suis generis* about intersectionality as a paradigm in ethno-nationalist or sectarian power-sharing systems.

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<sup>1</sup> John Högström, "Women's Representation in National Politics in the World's Democratic Countries: A Research Note," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 33, no. 3 (2012): 263-279.



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As a prelude to the key findings that emerged, the research framework used in this project carries two key contributions to the study of women's political representation in Lebanon. First, the research offers a novel theoretical framework that grounds analysis of the role of women within political studies literature. In particular, the research aimed at unpacking the ways in which patriarchy and sectarianism are intertwined in the direction of discriminating against the role of women in politics. Feminist scholars specializing in the case of Lebanon have made this correlation very vividly in existing literature and recent work for example by Mikdashi (2014).<sup>2</sup> However, there has been little inquiry on how patriarchy manifests in electoral politics, media, and the public space in a way that favors men in Lebanese politics. The seminal work by Suad Joseph encourages case study research that links private and public spheres to the political across the Arab region.<sup>3</sup> To that end, the research offers a relational approach between the power-sharing system and women's experience in political life. From political party leaders, to activists, judges, and public servants the research sought to map out the ways in which sectarian power-sharing favors men and discourages women from ascending into political institutions. The second key contribution in the approach of this study was the methodological approach of biographical interviews. Life histories is emerging as a key tool for social science research but also carries dilemmas for feminist researchers who seek to iterate the experience of women but also to maintain their privacy.<sup>4</sup> The research undertaken in this project sought to develop a customized tool to understand how past experiences and life choices of women were influenced by the political system in a way that challenged their role in political life. To that

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<sup>2</sup> Mikdashi, Maya. "Sex and Sectarianism The Legal Architecture of Lebanese Citizenship." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 2 (2014): 279-293.

<sup>3</sup> For instance Joseph, Suad. "Elite strategies for state-building: Women, family, religion and state in Iraq and Lebanon." In *Women, Islam and the state*, pp. 176-200. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See Geiger, Susan NG. "Women's life histories: Method and content." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 2 (1986): 334-351.



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end, the research is purposefully focused on biographical interviews precisely to generate data on how women diagnose and frame intersectionality through their experience with the political system. This work therefore reinforces a feminist “iterative energy” and helps unravel the epistemological position of women as marginalized subjects in Lebanese national politics.<sup>5</sup>

This project proceeded in accordance with the three objectives in a three-phased approach. First, a mapping of existing reports on the status of women in Lebanon showcased discrimination from a legal, political and socio-economic standing. Second, data was collected from around 145 women participants gathered from biographical interviews and focus groups. Lastly, findings were grounded in the paradigm of intersectionality to argue that there are unique or *suis generis* ways in which a sectarian power-sharing system challenges women’s political representation. The research has thus far led to four key findings in relation to the question of why Lebanese women are so under-represented in national political institutions.

This initial findings are based on the analysis conducted mainly from biographical interviews. First, sectarian power-sharing is a masculine affair. Research participants cited examples of masculinity in the media and public sphere as well as in the discursive aspect of politics. Second, women perceived national politics as an ineffective effort. Research participants equated national political institutions with deadlocks and corruption that they did not want to engage with. Third, a political career is not a feasible endeavor for women. Research participants cited examples in both the private and public citizenship that acted as concrete obstacles to their ability to ascend to political office. Lastly, participants considered that the

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<sup>5</sup> See: Adrien Wing, “Brief Reflections Toward a Multiplicative Theory and Praxis of Being,” *Berkeley Women’s Law Journal* 6, no.1 (1990): 181.



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sectarian system is a patriarchal system preferring the rule of religious men over the private affairs of women. These findings constitute a significant contribution to existing literature on sectarian identities within the context of Lebanon by bringing in a gendered analysis to identity politics. Whereas identity politics and feminist research have already proven the historical existence of patriarchal political structures that dominate a weak state in Lebanon,<sup>6</sup> the thrust of this research is in unpacking a gendered analysis on the political system. In the final analysis, the research utilizes the paradigm of intersectionality to argue that discrimination against Lebanese women is reinforced by the very same pillars that form its political system. It follows that without a change to the sectarian basis of power-sharing women will remain at the intersection of multiple forms and layers of discrimination which challenges women's political representation. It is not surprising then that the outcome is a system so costly, dangerous and almost impossible for women to navigate through and earn their seats in national political institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> For example in Moghadam, Valentine M. "Gender, national identity and citizenship: reflections on the Middle East and North Africa." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 19, no. 1 (1999): 137-157.