

## **Gender, Policy and Public Opinion in Syria and Lebanon**

John D. Willingham  
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Survey research has a role to play in providing women with a public voice where custom and culture do not permit them their own. It can be used to inform and shape empowerment policies from the perspective of each population. The Women in Muslim Countries (WIMC) study<sup>1</sup> is designed to measure women's empowerment in actual daily practice, providing an in-depth look into the oft-perceived gap between current public policy and empowerment initiatives, as well as actual practice on the personal and local level. The answers are intended to yield a metric for promoting excellence in public policy by informing policymakers on women's attitudes about the affects of policy initiatives, as well as a measure of the effectiveness of those policies.

This study addresses results of surveys D3 conducted in Lebanon and Syria focusing on the female respondents. It looks at the rights, behaviors, and attitudes of Lebanese and Syrian women today, while also examining efforts made by each country's government to protect and promote women's rights. Lebanon and Syria share a border, as well as a relatively heterogeneous ethnic and religious societal make-up. They also share a contentious history with one other. In the wake of French colonization, each state embarked on radically different paths to becoming a modern nation-state. At times, the rights of women were the focus of public debates over the future of each country.

The status of women in Syria and Lebanon has long been considered crucial to public discourses regarding the condition of each country. This study provides insight into how women perceive their *de facto* status in the face of competing discourses shaping the political, economic, and social landscape of each country. Namely, it looks at the behaviors and attitudes of Syrian and Lebanese women today, while also examining efforts made by each country's government to protect and promote women's rights. By analyzing female opinion in Lebanon and Syria, this study attempts to place women's status in the context of each country's larger social and political history. Despite each country's different path to becoming a modern nation-state, similar patterns emerged in each country that ultimately impacted women's status.

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<sup>1</sup> WIMC is sponsored and managed by D3 Systems ([www.d3systems.com](http://www.d3systems.com)). At the time of this report, results from 23 countries were available for analysis. Syrian opinion throughout the report may be analyzed and compared against opinion from 10 Arab countries also included in the study: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Yemen, Kuwait, and the UAE.



One might expect women to enjoy a greater degree of status in Lebanon as opposed to Syria. For one, Lebanese women are often perceived as enjoying an improved status than women in neighboring Arab countries due in large part to the country's pluralistic system and cosmopolitan nature.<sup>2</sup> Second, Syria's development has been characterized by intense struggles between the authoritarian state and the strong presence of an Islamic opposition. Both forces routinely subjugated women in the past, effectively using them as bargaining chips in a much larger political game. Paternal politics dominated both secular and non-secular discourses. For instance, the state may view women as fulfilling an important economic role, while Islamist opposition forces viewed women as important markers of cultural authenticity. This constant tug-of-war between political and religious groups in Lebanon and Syria often placed women's status in a state of flux. Therefore, we might expect female attitudes in Lebanon and Syria to be more similar than one might imagine, despite their different paths to modern statehood.

The results of this study indicate that the majority of women in Syria and Lebanon feel they are free to exercise their rights at home and in the public domain, with respect to employment, compensation, access to health care, and voting rights. They also believe their rights under the *United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) are protected and promoted within Islamic law or shari'a. Overall, attitudes among women in Syria and Lebanon are more closely aligned than one might imagine. Marginalization of women's status is a shared feature of *both* systems. Therefore, it's not surprising we see similar results in both countries.

Ideally, this study is meant to provide context to the issue of women's status in Syria and Lebanon, while also providing insight into female attitudes on a few broad, but key areas often associated with improving women's status, namely, the economic and political realms at both the public and private level. Future research should explore new indicators for measuring female attitudes in the public and private space. Also, researchers should examine to what extent religion may impact female perceptions about right and daily life. Religion is examined in this

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<sup>2</sup> As one recent report noted, Lebanon has long been considered cosmopolitan and multi-cultural: "Lebanon is an Arab country coloured by Western influences which gives it a cosmopolitan character and a multicultural legacy." See Limaye, Anita. "South Lebanon: Cosmopolitan character and multicultural legacy." *The Economic Times*. 28 January 2010. Online < <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/features/et-travel/South-Lebanon-Cosmopolitan-character-and-multicultural-legacy/articleshow/5506712.cms> > (16 April 2010).

study to a limited extent; however, few inter-religious differences were noted. This study is intended to be a starting point for future research.

As part of a collective effort to understand the status of rights (in practice and beliefs) of women around the world, D3 Systems, Inc. sponsors and manages the 23 country WIMC. The Syrian and Lebanese surveys consist of interviews with randomly selected women in each country. The respondents were interviewed by native speakers. Syria had n=505 interviewed by telephone May 13-24, 2008; Lebanon n=508 interviewed in person (face-to-face) October 15-20, 2008. The margin of standard error for the study is +/- 4% at the 95% confidence level.

This study is set-up into four parts. First, it looks at the background of women's status in Syria and Lebanon. Focus is placed primarily on how the issue of women's status evolved in both countries since the end of the French mandate. A brief literature review is provided which highlights the intense struggles that emerged between rival political forces in both countries. These battles often marginalized the issue of women's status, thus impacting public opinion among women in these countries today. Second, results from D3's 2008 surveys in Lebanon and Syria are provided, analyzed and compared with each other, as well as other Arab countries featured in D3's WIMC study. Next, a brief discussion of the results is provided. In this section, emphasis is placed on how each country's history of male-dominated politics may help to explain why Syrian female perceptions about status fail to lag behind female perceptions in Lebanon. The study concludes by suggesting that Lebanon's cosmopolitan nature does not translate into increased gains for Lebanese women, nor has it led to a higher frequency of positive perceptions of status among respondents.

### *Background on Women's Status in Syria and Lebanon*

#### *Syria*

Since the end of French colonial rule in the Middle East and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Syria has enjoyed a position of status in the Middle East. In 1946, Syria became an independent state. Beginning in 1963, Syria continues to be ruled by the pan-Arab Ba'th Socialist Party.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The rival wing of this party governed Iraq up until the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

Syria functions largely as a “security state,” a label derived from Syria’s militaristic approach to governing at home and exporting its influence abroad. In 2007, a CRS report noted the militaristic nature of Syrian regimes since the incoming of Ba’thist leaders.<sup>4</sup> One of the primary reasons for Syria’s long-standing military and security establishment was due to the instability caused by factionalism within the armed forces, as well as violent elements of a determined Islamist opposition. Often military factions and Islamist groups vied for power through regime change throughout the country’s formative years. As Syria moved into the 1970’s, it became clear that the consolidation of power by civilian leadership could only be achieved by gaining a position of supremacy over the country’s armed forces and any opposition forces religious or secular.<sup>5</sup>

Since these 1982 events, the Syrian regime has attempted to “co-opt” political Islamist groups by promoting Islamic influences as a social force for national unification.<sup>6</sup> However, secularist approaches to govern figure prominently in the psyche and behavior of the regime. Contradictory to its efforts to promote Syria’s Islamic identity, the governing regime has also used the influence of political Islam to justify its legitimacy and eliminate the existence of opposition elements. The end-result is a paternalistic approach to governing which relies on repressive tactics (sometimes violent) to ensure regime survival.

At times, the regime has sought to promote gender equality in Syria.<sup>7</sup> The Ba’th Party considers women as a base of potential political support. However, the political effort to promote and protect women’s rights in the public space has been met with opposition by Islamic forces seeking to preserve Syria’s long-standing social and religious traditions.<sup>8</sup> In the face of this opposition, the Syrian government has entered into numerous international agreements aimed at improving the status of women, including the CEDAW. Syria ratified the CEDAW in

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp notes, “The role of the armed forces and national security services has figured prominently in most Syrian regimes and predates by some years the establishment of the Ba’thist regime. Factionalism within the armed forces was a key cause of instability in Syria in the past, as military cliques jockeyed for power and secured and toppled governments with considerable frequency.” See Sharp, Jeremy M. “Syria Background and U.S. Relations”. Congressional Research Service. 14 September 2009.

<sup>5</sup> One of the main opposition groups challenging the regime has been the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB). As one scholar notes, throughout Syria’s history this group was once considered the “most imminent threat to Syrian stability.” This changed in 1982, when Syria’s Asad regime attacked the SMB’s power-base in the city of Hama, Syria, killing an estimate of 10,000 people. See Sharp, Jeremy M. “Syria Background and U.S. Relations”. Congressional Research Service. 14 September 2009, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Sharp, Jeremy M. “Syria Background and U.S. Relations”. Congressional Research Service. 14 September 2009, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> See: UN POGAR, Gender and Citizenship Initiative <<http://gender.pogar.org/countries/country.asp?cid=19>> (November 2009).

<sup>8</sup> According to the UN: “Deeply felt social codes discourage women from entering the public realm or making political demands. While a minority of women has entered the workforce and politics, the majority continues to live a traditional lifestyle,” See: UN POGAR Gender and Citizenship Initiative <<http://gender.pogar.org/countries/country.asp?cid=19>> (November 2009).

September of 2002, and acceded to the Convention in March of 2003 albeit with a number of reservations, some of which contradicted the central purpose of the Convention.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these legal reservations, some scholars maintain that Syria has attempted to improve the status of women. As one source notes: “Syria was in the vanguard among the states concerned with women’s rights, because of its prevailing political thought, open unto the principle of women’s equality to men.”<sup>10</sup> Case in point, the 1973 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic ostensibly provides for equality of the sexes under the law. A number of articles promote each citizen’s right to participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country, as well as the ability of individuals to exercise their rights and enjoy their freedoms within the limits of the law.<sup>11</sup>

The International Convention of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which came into effect in 1976, held the Syrian government to a standard of providing equal economic, social and cultural rights for males *and* females.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Family Law, adopted by the UN in 1979, came into effect in Syria in 1981. Issues of health care and education were addressed by the

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<sup>9</sup> Syria entered reservations with Article 2, in its entirety (considered a core provision of the convention, this article requires states to condemn all forms of discrimination and provide legal protection of the rights of women); Article 9, paragraph 2 (granting children the nationality of their mother); Article 15, paragraph 4 (on freedom of movement and choice of domicile); Article 16, paragraphs 1 (c), (d), (f), and (g), (regarding rights and responsibilities of marriage, as well as the dissolution of marriage with respect to guardianship, kinship, maintenance and adoption); Article 16, paragraph 2 (regarding the legal effect of the betrothal and marriage of a child); and Article 29, paragraph 1 (arbitration between countries locked in dispute) See: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, “Declarations, Reservations, and Objections to CEDAW: Syrian Arab Republic,” <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm>> (November 2009).

<sup>10</sup> George Jabbour. “Syrian Women and Human Rights.” Paper presented at the “Women in Syria Today” conference. Damascus University. 25-26 June 2006, Damascus, Syria. <<http://www.fafu.no/ais/middeast/syria/syrianwomen/SW-Jabbour.pdf>> (November 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Article 45 explicitly addresses the issue of women in the public space: “The State shall guarantee to women all of the opportunities that enable them to make a full and effective contribution to political, social, cultural and economic life, and shall endeavour to eliminate the restrictions impeding their development and participation in building Arab socialist society. These constitutional principles determine the meaning of the criteria designed to achieve respect for the equality of the sexes and also recognize the legal competence of women Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. “Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Initial Report of States: Syria. (29 August 2005), p.38.

<sup>12</sup> This includes the right to work, the right to fair and satisfactory conditions of work, the right to form trade unions, the right to social security, rights of family protection (including special protection for mothers before and after giving birth), the right to enjoy an adequate standard of living, the right to physical and mental health, the right to education, and finally, the right to take part in Syria’s cultural life. See: George Jabbour. “Syrian Women and Human Rights.” Paper presented at the “Women in Syria Today” conference. Damascus University. 25-26 June 2006, Damascus, Syria. <<http://www.fafu.no/ais/middeast/syria/syrianwomen/SW-Jabbour.pdf>> (November 2009).

Convention. Article 11 ensures that women are not subject to discrimination in the work place, while Article 12 prohibits discrimination toward women in areas of health care.

Sparre (2008) argues that Syria's emphasis on secular nationalism has long been considered crucial to the state's survival in the face of competing cultural, political, and religious forces in society.<sup>13</sup> Women were often seen as markers of the nation's progress and therefore encouraged to take care of the private space or in some cases enter the public space, albeit in a limited capacity.

This argument features prominently in the works of historians like Abu-Lughod (1998), Thompson (2001), and Pollard (2005).<sup>14</sup> In the case of Syria, the secular national ideals of unity and equality proved to be important ideological platforms upon which the legitimacy of the government rested. Moreover, the country sought to provide social services in exchange for this legitimacy. The main point Sparre emphasized is the central role the Syrian state plays in the lives of ordinary citizens regardless of gender.

Sparre (2008) also notes that in the face of economic decline, public discourse about the role of women changed at times, as Islamic forces sought to put women back in the domestic sphere in order to retain and revitalize Syria's cultural-religious identity. Women were viewed as "carriers of tradition" not markers of modernization.<sup>15</sup> As Islamic forces gained more power in times of socio-economic problems, the state also began to reemphasize the role of the family in Syrian society, while tolerating efforts to promote Islam in the public space. While Syria promoted a form of secular nationalism that cultivated ideals of equality, especially in the labor force, Islamic forces routinely pushed back against state-sponsored initiatives to bring women into the public space. Islamic discourses emphasized the crucial role that women played as mothers and domestic keepers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> S.L. Sparre. "Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2008): pp. 3-20 (p.4).

<sup>14</sup> See Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998; and Thompson, Elizabeth. *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privileges, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000; and also Pollard, Lisa. *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> S.L. Sparre. "Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

However, both groups were forced to renegotiate the status of women at times, in order to compete for their support. At times the state accepted Islamist attempts to frame a women's duty in terms of their domestic role, while at other times, Islamist groups accepted the fact that women could enter the public space for the purposes of receiving education and proper health care. In essence, women were markers of progress for both groups: for the state, women were seen as markers of progress and modernity, but for Islamic groups, women were seen as markers of a wider cultural authenticity in the face of negative foreign influence.<sup>17</sup> As a result, gender roles evolved over time, but Syrian women have continued to consider that they have a social responsibility to the state *and* the family or community.<sup>18</sup> New forms of dialogue have reframed this dual system of duties as crucial to the overall improvement of the state.

In this sense, social responsibility is not limited to women operating in official public capacity, but rather, it requires that women take care of the home. In return for this complicity, the state provides them with basic needs, while also officially recognizing them as important actors in securing the well-being of the state. This became increasingly important to the Syrian government as state resources diminished, and securing the social welfare of citizens was placed in jeopardy.<sup>19</sup> Women are able to connect their roles as keepers of the domestic realm with the overall progress of the nation.<sup>20</sup>

This give-and-take relationship appears to have some influence on the figures presented in this study. Namely, women in Syria appear to accept their social responsibility, while finding no contradiction between secular and non-secular forms of law. In general, they seem satisfied with aspects of their public and private lives. Syria's history suggests willingness (at some level) on the part of the government to promote and protect women's rights. As Kadiyoti (1997) notes, modern states, like Syria, "have to confront and to some extent eradicate local particularism in order to create new forms of civic consciousness and to liberate all available forces of

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<sup>17</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998 pp. 243-269.

<sup>18</sup> S.L. Sparre. "Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998 pp. 243-269. p.16.

<sup>20</sup> Pollard (2005) notes this in a case-study of gender in Egypt. She remarks that "...women and their activities—domestic or otherwise—symbolized Egypt's political condition." See Pollard, Lisa. *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005. p. 153.

development, including the labor potential of their female citizens.”<sup>21</sup> Yet UN reports also appear to reinforce the conventional wisdom, namely that Syrian women lack essential rights.<sup>22</sup> Also, a brief glimpse into Syrian society shows that the status of women has long been considered crucial to public discourses regarding the condition of the nation.

### *Lebanon*

The case of Lebanon reveals many similarities with Syria’s historical course, but also many differences. In particular, Lebanon shares a unique colonial experience with Syria yet unlike Syria, Lebanon has not enjoyed a position of stature in the region. For the most part, Lebanon is considered as more liberal than its Arab neighbors. Lebanon has been heavily influenced by Western culture and a number of writers and scholars have noted the country’s “cosmopolitan” nature.<sup>23</sup> Beirut was once nicknamed the “Paris of the Middle East” and the country features *chic* night clubs, art galleries, fashion houses, and restaurants. The country seemed to be an exemplary model for improving women’s status in the region.

In 1943, Lebanon became fully independent from French colonial rule.<sup>24</sup> In the wake of colonial rule, reforms took place in Lebanon’s political landscape emphasizing power sharing among the country’s rich and diverse ethnic-religious make-up. Political and religious factions became the sole power players in Lebanon’s unique, albeit violence prone, political system. While prolonged violence and instability helped Syria evolve into a militaristic state ruled by a strong-handed regime, Lebanon devolved into a very different “militarized” state where competing armed entities battled for power and influence. Effectively, Lebanon has lacked many of the official state capacities enjoyed by the authoritarian Syria regime. Largely this is a result of its hyper-pluralistic system where religious-ethnic identities determine power sharing.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kandiyoti, Deniz. “Women, Islam and the State.” In *Political Islam*. Berkeley, CA , University of California Press, 1997. pp. 188.

<sup>22</sup> “Toolkit: The Importance of Gender Mainstreaming in Syria.” *UNDP: BDP Global Project*. Online <<http://www.pogar.org/publications/other/undp/gender/syria-gender-toolkit-06e.pdf> > (21 April 2010).

<sup>23</sup> “[NYTimes: Lebanon’s Cosmopolitan Capital is Finally Getting its Groove Back](http://lebanonmatters.com/2010/03/nyt-lebanons-cosmopolitan-capital-is-finally-getting-its-groove-back/).” *Lebanon Matters*. 23 March 2010. Online <<http://lebanonmatters.com/2010/03/nyt-lebanons-cosmopolitan-capital-is-finally-getting-its-groove-back/>> (18 April 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Prados, Alfred B. “Lebanon”. *CRS Report for Congress*. 23 November 2007.

<sup>25</sup> One of the biggest problems in Lebanon’s political system is the tension between competing political factions. Deriving its power from the country’s primary religious groups, the “National Covenant” was aimed to appease the various groups in an effort to erase political gridlock and potential violence. The Covenant was established *de facto* as an unwritten agreement between the groups. It provides that the President be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament

Due to the country's fragmented social landscape, a national census has not been conducted since 1932. Political machinations overtook previously agreed upon frameworks and governance ratios. As Muslims gradually outnumbered Christians, discontent over power-sharing imbalances became a major factor in exacerbating inter-communal tensions. By 1975, violence had erupted in Lebanon resulting in a destructive fifteen year civil war from which the country has never quite recovered. Moreover, prolonged political breakdown has proven detrimental to the country's ability to enact meaningful, productive, consensus-supported domestic and foreign policies.

The United States, Israel, Syria, and Iran, have all left an indelible mark on the Lebanese political landscape. Furthermore, Lebanon has proved to be a viable staging ground for non-state actors such as Palestinian resistance groups, and the Islamic-inspired and oft-perceived Iranian-backed *Hezbollah*. Israel and Syria have had the largest impact on Lebanon, but Syria's presence is most relevant to this study. Syria and Lebanon share experiences under the French colonial mandate and have been involved (directly and indirectly) with one another politically and economically for the last thirty years.

Since 1976, Syrian forces have moved in and out of Lebanon. Syrian involvement in the Lebanon's political process has long strained relations between the two neighbors. These relations were further strained in the aftermath of the February 2005 Rafik Hariri assassination. Many international observers and Lebanese officials implicated the Syrian regime in the murder of Lebanon's former Prime Minister. Under pressure from the international community, Syria subsequently began to withdraw its military and intelligence personnel operating in Lebanon.<sup>26</sup>

The country's turbulent history, hyper-factionalized political system, and presence of various armed-Islamist and pro-Palestinian groups, has presented numerous challenges to improvements in women's status. The fact that Lebanon has been plagued with political and economic problems for much of its existence, along with the country's varied ethnic-religious make-up, presents researchers with many difficulties when analyzing issues related to women's status.

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as Shi'a Muslim. In parliament, seats were divided on the basis of six Christians to five Muslims. Furthermore, cabinet posts were planned to be distributed among the country's primary ethnic-religious groups. See: Alfred B Prados. "Lebanon". *CRS Report for Congress*. 23 November 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Subsequent reports in the years following Hariri's assassination acknowledged Syrian intelligence continued to operate in the country. See Prados, Alfred B. "Lebanon". *CRS Report for Congress*. 23 November 2007.

Officially, there are seventeen religions recognized by the Lebanese state with the proper legal jurisdiction to rule on family and religious law.<sup>27</sup> Lebanon represents a unique case in the realm of legal studies, as each ethno-religious community has its own family law procedure, as well as its own religious courts for adjudication. As a UN report notes, these varied community jurisdictions contribute to “... an extreme case of legal pluralism”.<sup>28</sup> In addition, jurisdictional disputes are quite frequent.<sup>29</sup>

Lebanon still relies on its original 1926 Constitution as the basis for governing. This constitution recognizes total freedom of religion and recognizes each group’s right to promulgate personal status legislation. While Syria attempts to use religion and a strong sense of national identity as a force of unification, Lebanon’s diverse make-up has precluded any meaningful reconciliation or unification efforts. Furthermore, Lebanese law, as well as its fractious and violent history, appears to reinforce notions of sectarianism among competing groups. Amidst the factionalized political fray, the issue of women’s status has largely gone unnoticed at times.

Lebanon’s contentious and often violent history presented women with many challenges from the state and the community. Women were often used as bargaining chips by competing groups or in some cases were excluded entirely from public debates. Lina Khatib (2008) argues that war in Lebanon had negative effects on women, namely, it reinforced patriarchal subjugation causing them further economic, social and political exclusion.<sup>30</sup> On the positive side, Lebanon’s violent history also provided women with more opportunities to participate in public life. Similar to the argument advanced in this study, Khatib argues that understanding the status of women in Lebanon requires one to examine this status in the context of Lebanon’s historical progression from French colony to nation-state.

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<sup>27</sup> This total includes: Maronite, Greek-Catholic, Armenian-Catholic, Syriac-Catholic, Latin Catholic, Chaldean-Catholic, Greek-Orthodox, Armenian-Orthodox, Syriac-monophysite, Assyrian, Protestant, Coptic-Orthodox, Chaldean-Orthodox, Sunni, Shiite, Druze, Alawite. See: Tabet, Gihane. “Women in Personal Status Laws: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria”. SHS Papers in Women’s Studies / Gender Research. No. 4. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Gender Equality and Development Section (July 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Tabet, Gihane. “Women in Personal Status Laws: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria”. SHS Papers in Women’s Studies / Gender Research. No. 4. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Gender Equality and Development Section (July 2005). p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Khatib, Lina. “Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol.35, No. 3 (December 2008), pp. 437-451.



Khatib also notes that “women in Lebanon are often perceived as enjoying a better status than their sisters in other Arab countries, whether economically, socially, or politically.”<sup>31</sup> Lebanese women acquired the right to vote in 1952, and enjoy increased access to the military services, private business employment, government employment, and foreign travel. Khatib does not deny that women in Lebanon have been able to increase their participation in the public space in the last 30 years, but she does note that media tended to portray a rosy picture of women in Lebanon which was not often the case.<sup>32</sup>

Despite incremental gains, Khatib argues that women in Lebanon are subjected to a male dominated political, social, and economic order that marginalizes their status. Most notably, this marginalization occurs in the public political space. While Lebanon allows for universal suffrage and equal access to participate in the country’s political system, the reality of the situation is much different. Khatib blames not just the current political system, but the larger social framework that informs it. Years of war and in-fighting left women with little to show for in the way of political and economic gains.

Article 7 of the Lebanese Constitution provides for universal equality under the law without explicitly preventing gender discrimination. Khatib refers to this as “institutionalized” gender discrimination thanks to the lack of explicit provisions aimed at preventing this kind of discrimination.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, personal status laws in Lebanon are often viewed as contradictory the Constitution’s proclamation of equality. For some observers, these laws reinforce gender discrimination in Lebanon. One aspect of personal status laws, family law, is governed by religious authorities in the Lebanese political system. This fact presents numerous complexities surrounding the status of women in Lebanon.<sup>34</sup>

In 1997, Lebanon ratified the CEDAW, but with reservations to Article 9, paragraph 2 of the Convention dealing with personal status laws, an area of the law handled by religious authorities operating in local communities. In essence, communities experience legislative and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid p. 437.

<sup>32</sup> Khatib notes that increased numbers of women in Lebanon were joining the workforce and army. Also, more women were traveling abroad without the permission of their husband. Women were also flocking to institutions of higher education. See Khatib, Lina. “Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol.35, No. 3 (December 2008), p. 437.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid p. 439.

<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Khatib calls for the “establishment of a civil status law in Lebanon that is not gender-biased.” Ibid, p. 450.

jurisdictional autonomy from the state.<sup>35</sup> Article 9 of Lebanon's Constitution sanctions this fragmented legal structure within the context of the country's diverse religious make-up, while reinforcing female subjugation within a patriarchal political and social framework. Like Syria, a dual system of secular and non-secular authority presents challenges to improvements in female status.

Like Syria, Lebanon shares a history of colonial influence by the French. As both nations sought political independence from the French, at times women were used as markers of national progress. Elizabeth Thompson (2000) uses gender as an analytical tool to explain the construction of the post-colonial civic order in Lebanon and Syria. She points out that nationalist rulers emerging in the wake of colonialism offered no real gains for women in the new civic order.<sup>36</sup> Lebanon undertook policies of liberalism, while Syria enacted statist policies in their nascent governments. Irrespective of the paths each took to governing, previous attempts to improve the status of women often failed to materialize as female interests were often subjugated to male interests being debated between nationalists and religious leaders.

Improvements in the status of women proved to be short-lived as women were often sacrificed politically and betrayed by their nationalist governments or their religious leaders. This constant renegotiation of power in the dual system had a negative impact on the future of women's status, as paternal authority, religious or political, subordinated women to an inferior role in the nation's civic order.<sup>37</sup> Among the religious establishment, Lebanese women were also faced with an all too common dilemma: fulfill their domestic role or enter the public space and betray their religious duties. Women's issues were often forgotten to appease male anxieties. Kandiyoti (1997) notes, "In Lebanon, governments formally relinquished matters of family and personal status to the religious authorities of existing communities."<sup>38</sup> Essentially, political patriarchy has been sustained by religious and secular political forces operating in Lebanon.

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<sup>35</sup> Tabet, Gihane. "Women in Personal Status Laws: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria". SHS Papers in Women's Studies / Gender Research. No. 4. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Gender Equality and Development Section (July 2005), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, Elizabeth. *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privileges, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> One feminist leader, in a 1924 speech in Beirut, noted that males in the Lebanese political system feared and resisted women's progress since it could come at their own expense, thus improvements in women's status often failed to materialize as paternal interests held sway. Ibid p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Women, Islam and the State." In *Political Islam*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1997. pp. 189.



Akram Khater (2001) offers a different perspective more in-tune with Lebanon's attempt to create an open, pluralistic socio-political landscape. He argues that women in the Lebanese social order have constantly attempted to renegotiate the boundaries of public and private in an effort to increase their own freedoms.<sup>39</sup> The author illuminates the inherent contradictions of modernity: the replacement of traditional constraints with new ideological and scientific constraints. As a result, innovative spaces emerge on the social landscape from which notions of gender were often redefined in the face of tradition and regulatory forces. Despite these constraints, we might expect women in Lebanon to push the envelope.

While Khatib and Thompson paint a rather bleak picture on the status of women in Lebanon, Khater suggests that it is not unusual for women to exercise their rights in the private and public space in the face of competing regulatory discourse concerning their status. In summary, the question of women's status in Lebanon is complex and often nebulous when approached by scholars and analysts. Based on these analyses, one can expect that female attitudes on issues in Syria and Lebanon may in fact be more similar than expected. Women in both countries suffered as a result of intense political debates between secular and non-secular forces. This dual nature of authority found in each country was male-dominated and largely marginalized the issue of women's status; however, we find in both cases that women were able to renegotiate the terms of their status, thus making incremental gains to improve their status.

### *Survey Results*

Through public opinion research it may be possible to ascertain what gains have been made regarding improving the status of women. By examining those who are directly affected by the social constructs existing in Lebanon and Syria, scholars and policy-makers can determine what gains, if any, have been made by women. This study places women's status in the context of each state's historical background; however, it goes further by analyzing the opinions of women in each country. The results of the D3 Systems WIMC study in Lebanon and Syria are found in the following section.

The results shown in this study indicate that women in Lebanon *and* Syria perceive some degree of improved status in rights and practice, irrespective of secular and non-secular laws and discourses. Despite each country's different path to becoming a modern nation-state in the

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<sup>39</sup> Khater, Akram. *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

Middle East's tumultuous and fractious political landscape, similar patterns emerged in each country that ultimately impacted women's status. It is possible that the gap between policy and practice, as well as positive perceptions about female status, are narrowing in both countries. However, policy-makers should take notice of the marginalization of women in past debates and continue to develop rhetoric into meaningful policy.

### *Religious Breakdown*

While predominantly Muslim, both Syria and Lebanon feature a rich multi-religious landscape. In Lebanon, 64% of the female's interviewed are self-identified Muslims of which 35% are Shi'a and 29% are Sunni. In addition, 29% of the sample identify as Christian and 7% as Druze.<sup>40</sup>

In Syria, the strong majority of female respondents are Sunni Muslim (62%). Eighteen percent are uncategorized Muslims (18%), while an additional 8% self-identify as Alawi Muslims.<sup>41</sup> Christians make up 5% of the sample followed by Druze (2%).

These breakouts and their impact on the results are explored more thoroughly in the discussion section. In most cases, the results show little inter-religious (Muslim and Christian) and intra-religious (i.e. Sunni v. Shi'a) group variation.

### *Secular v. Non-Secular Rights*

Despite reservations of both governments to a number of CEDAW articles, the majority of women in Syria and Lebanon believe their rights guaranteed under the CEDAW convention are protected and promoted within shari'a.<sup>42</sup> When women in Syria were asked how well they believe their rights under the CEDAW convention can effectively be protected and promoted within shari'a, 95% believe their rights are either "very well protected" or "somewhat protected." Of those who answered the question, 68% believe their rights can be "very well protected." This portion represents the highest percentage out of seventeen Arab countries where the question was asked.<sup>43</sup> Figure 1 highlights percentages of female respondents in both Lebanon and Syria who

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<sup>40</sup> 16% of the sample are self-identified Maronite Christians; 8% are "other christians"; and finally, 5% are Orthodox.

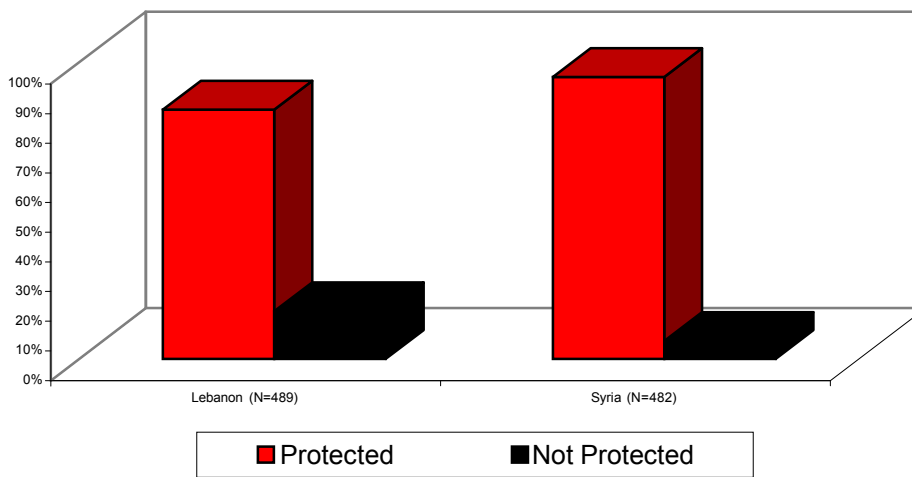
<sup>41</sup> In this case, the respondent refused to be categorized.

<sup>42</sup> Respondents were read the tenets of the CEDAW convention prior to the question asking about its protection under shari'a.

<sup>43</sup> Only Egypt (98%) and Jordan (97%) rank higher with Saudi Arabia ranking 4<sup>th</sup> (64%). Among countries from the Levant region, Syria ranks second only to Jordan. Lebanon ranks third with 84% of women believing their rights are "somewhat protected" or "very well protected. Across the sixteen countries, Syria has the third highest share of women who believe their rights are "somewhat protected" or "very well protected".

believe their rights under the UN CEDAW can be effectively protected within Shari'a law.  
 (Figure 1)

**How well do you believe that your rights under the UN CEDAW can be effectively protected and promoted within shari'a (Islamic law) in your country; very well protected, somewhat protected, not well protected or not protected at all?**  
 MoE +/- 4%



Women in Syria are more likely than women in Lebanon to believe their rights are protected (to some extent) within Shari'a law.<sup>44</sup> Only 5% of Syrian women in the survey believed their rights under the CEDAW cannot be protected and promoted (“not well” or “not at all”) under shari'a. These figures suggest that Syrian women are more likely to accept shari'a law (on some level) as the basis for governance in their society.

When looking at the impact of religion on the results, the data suggests that Lebanese Muslims are more likely than their Christian counterparts to see an issue between secular and non-secular rights. While majority (72%) of Christians believes their CEDAW rights are protected under sharia' law, an even greater majority (83%) of Muslims find no issue between their CEDAW rights and shari'a law. Among Syrian women, no discernible religious differences exist.

<sup>44</sup> Respondents had the choice of answering “very well protected” or “somewhat protected” versus “not well protected” or “not at all protected.”

Extremely high majorities of Christian and Muslim women find that their rights under the CEDAW are protected and promoted within shari'a law.

Figure 1 shows a slightly different story in the case of Lebanon. Here, under half of respondents surveyed believe their rights are “very well protected”; however, the large majority (81%) of women believes their rights are protected to some extent (“very well” or “somewhat”). What is evident is the fact that a smaller portion of women in Lebanon, compared with those in Syria, believe their rights are protected.

This perception may be influenced by Syrian government initiatives. In the last twenty years, the government has instituted a series of modest economic reforms. Along with these reforms, the UN reports that the Syrian government is showing an interest in reforming areas that impact the citizens' quality of life. These areas include education, information technology, administrative development, unemployment reduction, the improvement of government administration, and finally, health care.<sup>45</sup>

### *Personal Satisfaction with Life*

The Women in Muslim Countries survey also gauges the degree to which women are satisfied with their lives. Women in Syria tend to desire improvements in areas related to social services in order to make their lives happier. For example, Syrian women mention better health (30%) and better education (28%) as keys to improving their personal happiness. Only 16% of women in Syria desire greater wealth in order to improve their happiness in life.

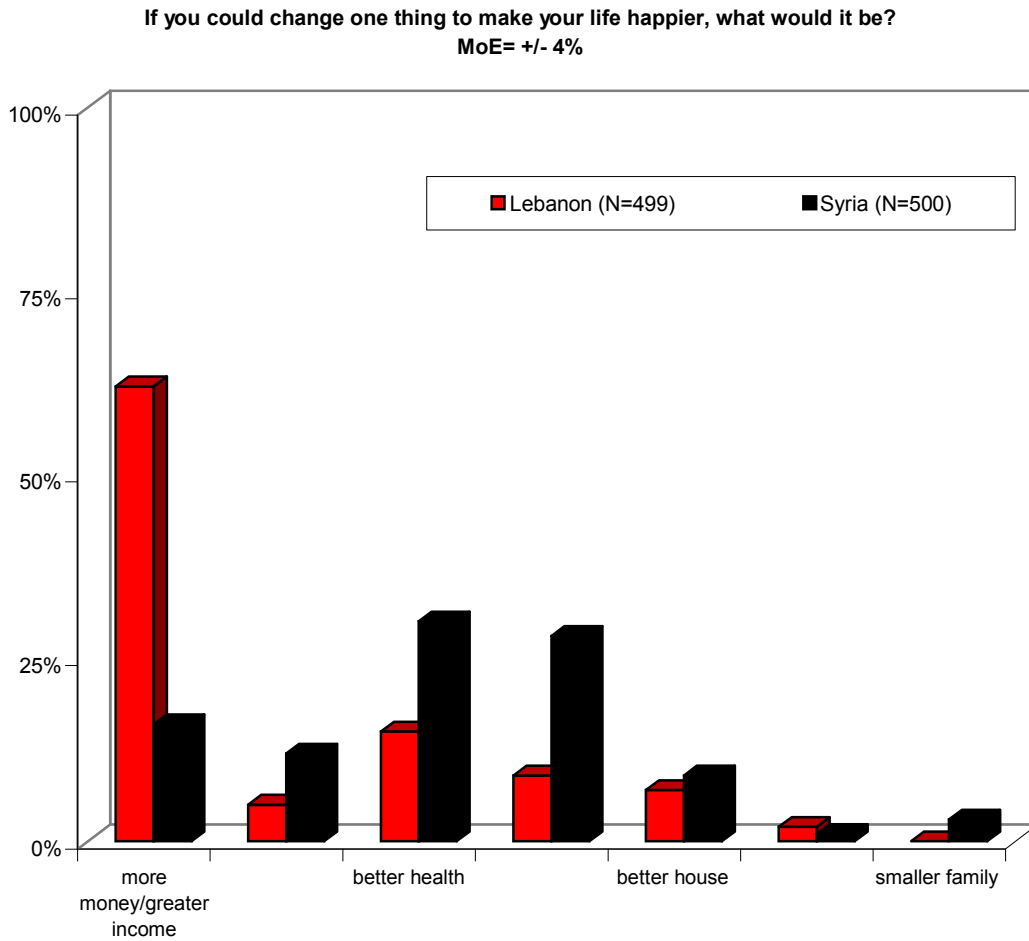
In contrast, this figure reaches 62% of Lebanese women in the survey. Only 15% of women in Lebanon desire better health, and even fewer desire better education (9%). In both instances, a very small percentage of women feel happy enough to report that no change is necessary in their lives. However, a slightly higher portion of Syrian women would not make any changes in their

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<sup>45</sup> Despite Syria's socialist economy, there is evidence of a shift toward privatization of the national economy. A UN report notes, “The reforms have focused on expanding the role of the private sector in the national economy, particularly in the fields of industry, trade, education and banking, and on making adjustments aimed at developing and enhancing the legislative and regulatory environment governing operation of the productive sector, including trade facilitation, tax reduction, the adoption of measures for a uniform bank rate and the promulgation of legislation typically providing for special facilities designed to encourage investment and export.” See: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. “Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Initial Report of States: Syria, (29 August 2005): p.8.

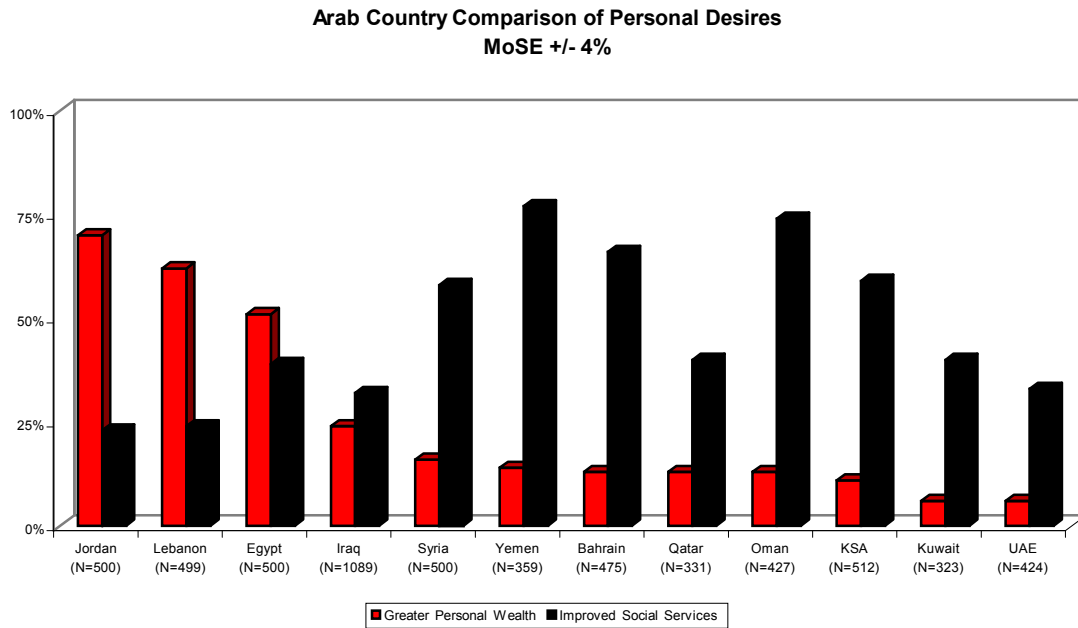


life (12% of Syrian women versus 5% of Lebanese women). Figure 3 compares the desires of women in Syria and Lebanon only. (Figure 3)



In comparison to other Arab countries, Lebanon ranks only behind Jordan in terms of women who desire greater personal wealth. Seventy percent of Jordanian women express a desire for more money as way to improve their happiness in life. Syria, on the other hand, ranks at the top

among Arab countries where women desire improvements in health and education. Figure 4 compares Lebanon and Syria with other Arab countries. (Figure 4)



In the above figure, only Jordan (70%) outranks Lebanon (62%) in terms of the percentage of women desiring greater money or income. Similarly, the same is true when measuring desire for improved education and health. Jordan (23%) has the lowest portion of women who desire better health and education followed closely by Lebanon (24%).

The D3 WIMC study has found that women’s desires and aspirations correlate quite predictably with the economic status of each country of the study.<sup>46</sup> For the purposes of this survey, women’s desires in Syria and Lebanon were compared to other countries in the region ranked by GDP per capita. Syria proves to be a unique case study of all the WIMC countries, since it lags behind others in GDP per capita yet women appear to desire little in the way of personal wealth, unlike Lebanon where increases in personal wealth is desired by a majority of respondents. Also, religion appears to play no significant role in predicting female desires.

<sup>46</sup> Feld, Karl and Will Hayes. “Different Faces of Shari’a: Women’s Aspirations in Saudi Arabia and South Asia.” (2009).



In previous studies, we have found that women in the much wealthier countries of Saudi Arabia are less likely to express a desire to meet daily needs such as more money in comparison to other desires such as better education and better health. Interestingly enough though, Syria, which ranks the lowest among these six countries in GDP per capita, is second only to Saudi Arabia in terms of respondents who said no change is necessary in their life. Despite its ranking in GDP per capita, Syrian women place *greater* emphasis on improving areas of education and healthcare, rather than income and money.

#### *Economic Status: Public and Private*

This study also measures the degree to which women in Lebanon and Syria are exercising economic freedoms in their lives. The majority (53%) of women in Syria self-identify as “homemakers,” while in Lebanon this label applies to a plurality (45%) of women. We also find that 30% of female respondents in Lebanon are currently employed and paid by someone else. This is true for 28% of women in Syria. A slightly higher portion (20%) of Lebanese women is unemployed at the moment compared to 15% of Syrian women.

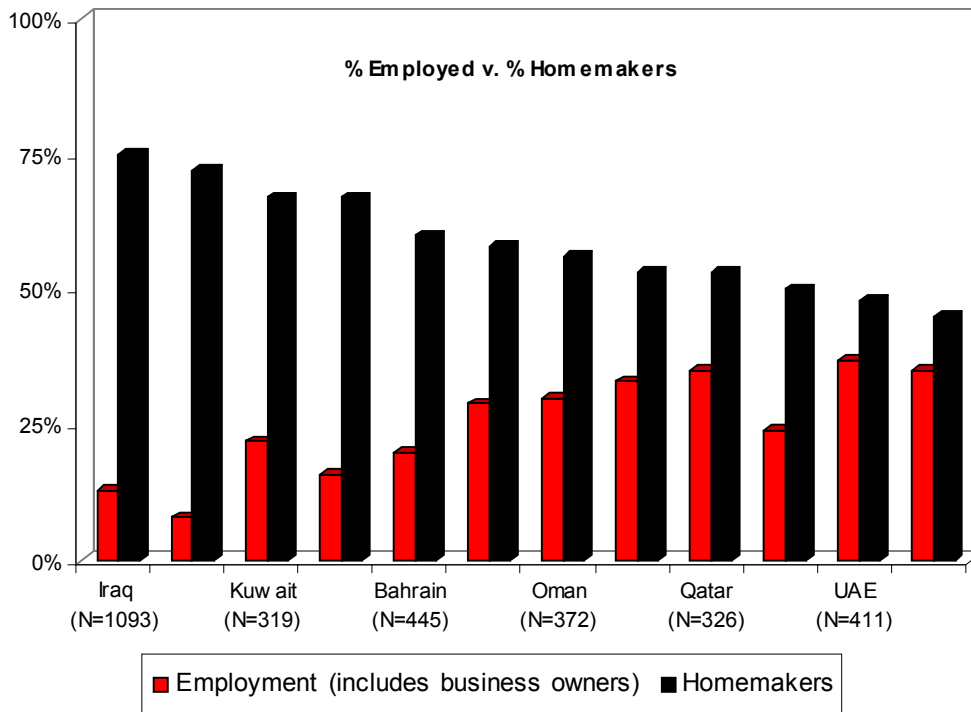
Taking religion into account, a higher percentage (46%) of Lebanese Shi’a women self-identify as homemakers than Lebanese Sunni (39%) and Maronite Christian women (38%).

Measuring employment status may help shed some insight into why Lebanese women tend to call for greater personal wealth. Lebanon has the smallest percentage of female homemakers across the Arab countries featured in the survey. Each of the other countries features a majority of women whose main duty is to tend to the domestic sphere, full-time. It is possible that the desire for more money among Lebanese women is due to the fact that more women are apparently working and participating in the economic arena as paid employees. Their employment status fuels their desire to “earn more” in order to find personal happiness. Moreover, since a high percentage of women are unemployed in Lebanon, this also may contribute to greater desire among Lebanese women to work and earn.

We also find that a large percentage (70%) of women in Syria would be interested and able to take advantage of the opportunity to start a business given access to training and start-up money. Only Egypt (87%) contains a higher percentage of women interested in potential opportunities to start a business. Forty-eight percent of women in Lebanon would be willing to take advantage of this opportunity, while 28% are not interested.

Figure 5 compares the percentage of women who are actually employed (including business owners) versus the percentage of self-identified homemakers. Only Lebanon (45%) and the UAE (48%) feature samples with less than majority of women homemakers. (Figure 5)

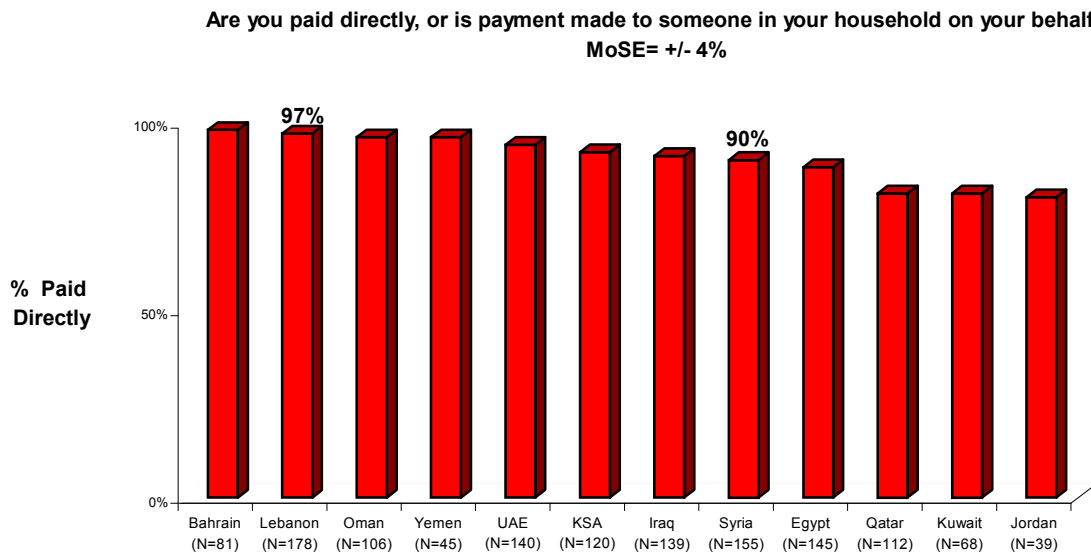
Please tell me which of the following best describes your work status. Do you currently own your own business, are you paid by an employer to work, you are looking for work but are unemployed, or are you a homemaker?  
 MoSE +/- 4%



The survey gauges a woman's ability to exercise control over her wages and finances. Upon further examination, an overwhelming number (97%) of employed women in Lebanon are paid directly, rather than having payments made to someone else in their household. In Syria, 90%

of women are paid directly compared to 10% who find themselves in a situation where payment is made on their behalf to a household member.

In this instance, only Bahrain (98%) has a larger portion of women who receive their wages directly when compared to Lebanese female workers. Figure 6 compares payment the methods by which females receive their wages across 12 Arab countries. It shows that in comparison to neighbors such as Jordan, Kuwait, and Qatar, women in Lebanon and Syria exercise more freedom in controlling their personal finances through receipt of wages. (Figure 6)



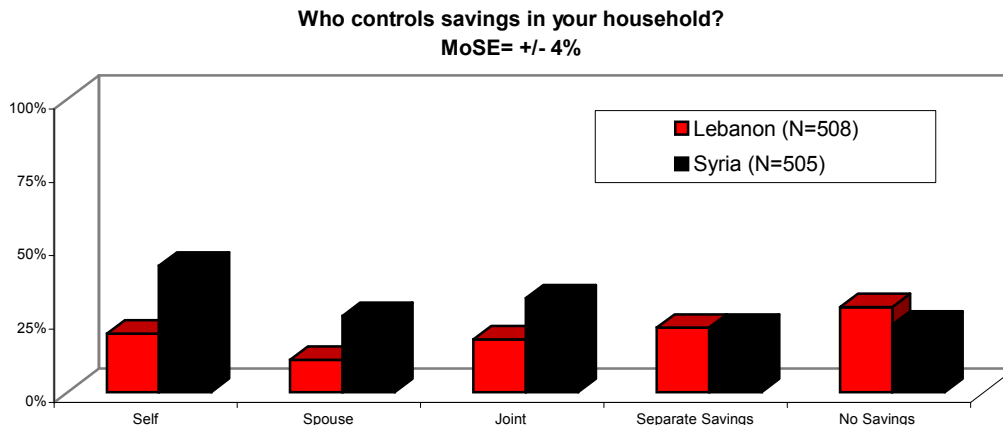
Women in Lebanon and Syria appear to exert some degree of financial influence in the household. When it comes to household decision-making over finances, a plurality (34%) of women in Lebanon are the primary decision-makers for purchases aimed at meeting daily needs such as food, clothing and cleaning supplies. This is also true in Syria (30%); however, joint-decision making (28%) is prevalent there as well.

In comparison to its Arab neighbors featured in the survey, Lebanon has the lowest percentage of women who claim their spouse controls their household savings. There is a small percentage

(11%) of Lebanese female respondents faced with a situation where household savings are controlled by the husband compared to 26% of Syrian women who find themselves in a similar situation.

Shi'a Lebanese women are less likely than their Sunni counterparts to exercise self-control over household purchasing decisions. Thirty-two percent of Sunni Muslim women are in situation where the spouse makes decision about household purchases, while 25% of Shi'a women are in the same situation.

In general, Lebanese women are more likely to say they have no savings, while Syrian women are more likely to be in charge of household savings. Figure 7 compares figures regarding control of household savings between Syria and Lebanon. The percentages in the table below indicate the percentage of female respondents who said that a particular household arrangement applies to them. (Figure 7)



In Figure 7, we find that Syrian women appear to play a larger role in household financial decision-making than their Lebanese counterparts, as evident by the greater portions exercising self and joint control over household savings. Close to a quarter (22%) of Syrian and Lebanese women say that they and their spouse have separate savings in the household.<sup>47</sup>

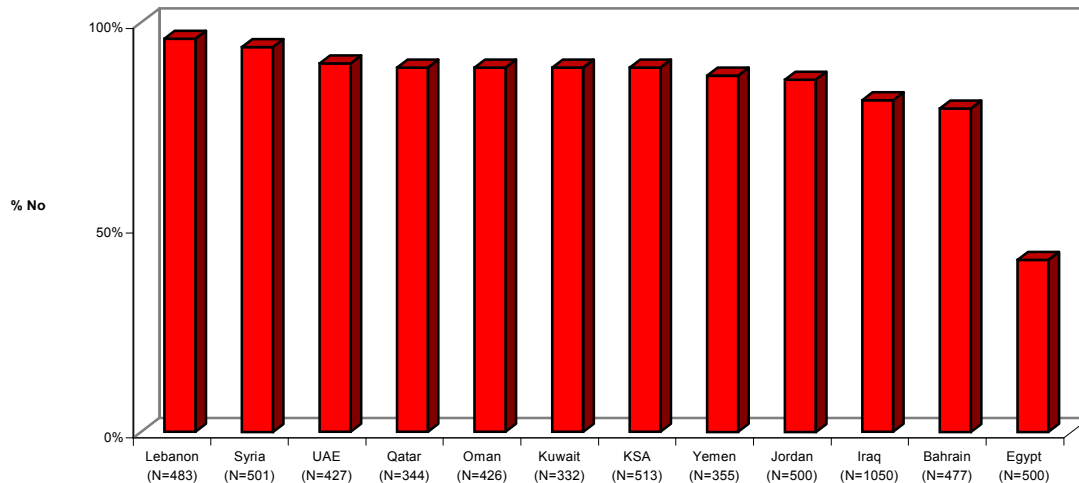
<sup>47</sup> Among Arab countries in the survey, Syria has the highest portion of women who say that separate savings applies to their household (tied with Saudi Arabia and Lebanon).

### Obstacles to Healthcare

According to a CEDAW report, the Syrian Ministry of Health seeks to provide preventative health services and treatment to citizens, *without discrimination*.<sup>48</sup> The results of this survey show that a large majority of women in Syria do not believe they have ever been denied health care because of their gender. In fact, only Lebanon (4%) has a lower percentage of women who believe they have been denied health care because of their gender.

In total, 96% of Lebanese women and 94% of Syrian women believe their gender *does not* prevent them from receiving health care. Figure 8 reveals the percentage of women who believe their gender plays no role in hindering their ability to receive healthcare in comparison with other Arab countries in the study. (Figure 8)

**Do you believe you've ever been denied health care you needed because you are a woman?**  
 MoSE +/- 4%

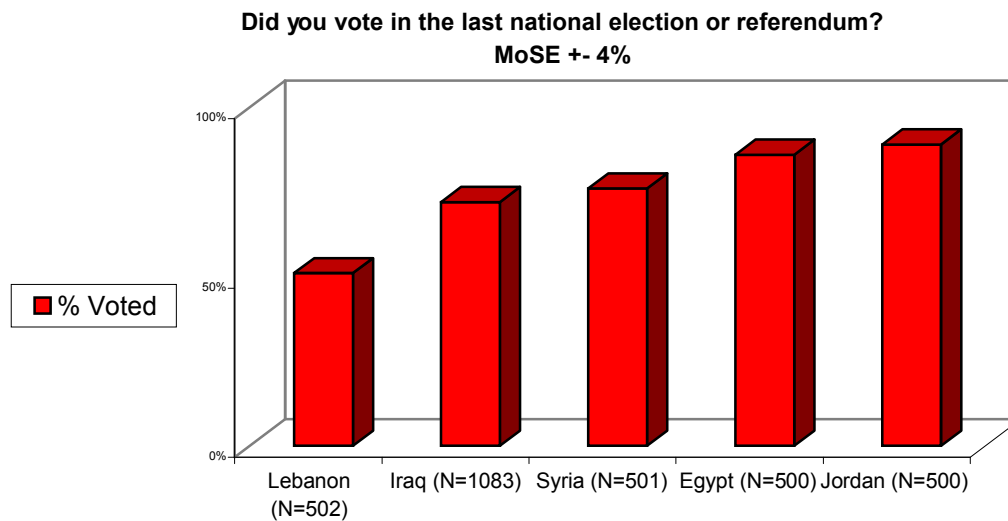


<sup>48</sup> The report states: “The Syrian Arab Republic has accordingly made great efforts to deliver health care to all,” Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. “Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Initial Report of States: Syria, (29 August 2005): p.58.

## Voting

The survey also gauges political participation among women in each country. Majorities of women in both Syria (76%) and Lebanon (50%) claim to have voted in their country's last election or referendum.<sup>49</sup> Overall, the percentage of voting women is highest in Jordan (89%), and lowest in Kuwait (17%). The results indicate that voter participation among women tends to be lower in the Gulf States, with the exception of Bahrain.<sup>50</sup>

Narrowing our focus to the Levant countries, Iraq, and Egypt, Lebanon ranks the lowest in terms of the percentage of women who voted in the last national election. Figure 8 compares voting numbers among Lebanese and Syrian women with Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. (Figure 9).



Political participation appears to be apart of life for these women in Lebanon and Syria; however, voting is much more prevalent among Syrian respondents.

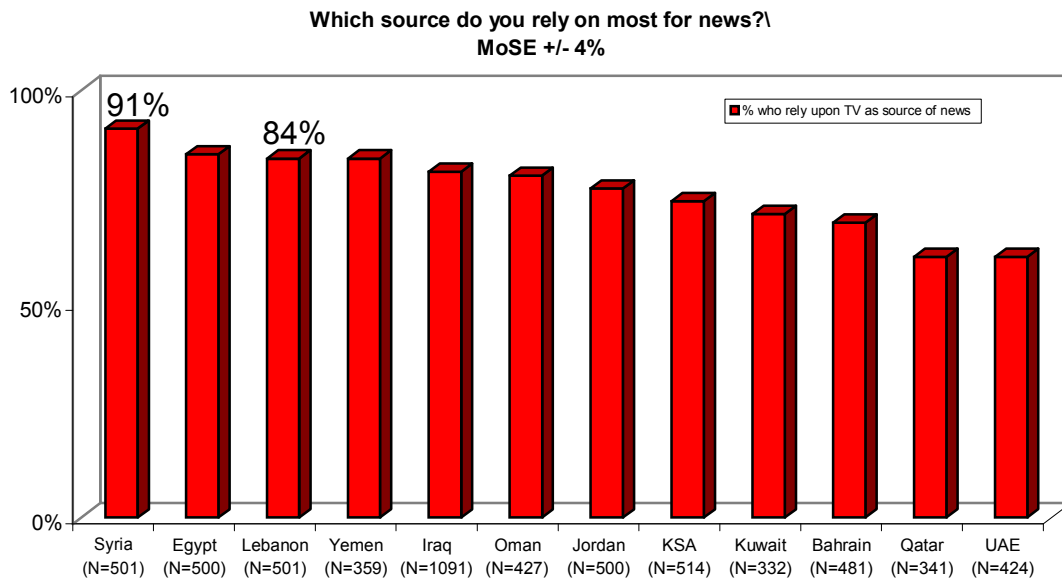
<sup>49</sup> For 18% of women in Lebanon, the question of voting was not applicable to their situation.

<sup>50</sup> Kuwait (17%), UAE (19%), Qatar (20%), and Oman (43%), all have under a majority of women who voted in the last election (Saudi Arabia is excluded from this analysis). Majorities of voting women are found in Bahrain (61%) and Yemen (52%).

*Media Consumption*

Finally, this study examines media behavior among Lebanese and Syrian women. Namely, what sources do respondents rely on most for news? First, as we see in most countries where D3 has polled, television is by far the most relied upon source of news for women in Syria (91%) and Lebanon (84%). In addition, 7% of Lebanese women point to friend and family members as their most relied upon source of news.

When placing these numbers in the context of other Arab countries, the concentration of television news viewers is highest in Syria followed by Egypt (85%), Lebanon and Yemen (both at 84%). The percentage of women relying on friends and family members as a source of news is highest in Lebanon. Reliance upon the Internet as a source is extremely low across all countries. Also, newspaper and magazine-use among women is typically lower in Lebanon (2%) and Syria (2%) in comparison to the Gulf States of UAE (23%), Qatar (21%), and Bahrain (18%). (Figure 10)



Similar to results found in other countries (not limited to the Arab world), television is the most relied upon media source for news and information. Regular Internet-usage is typically low among female respondents in the WIMC surveys. And, female usage of the Internet

### *Discussion*

To review, the data reveals that Lebanese women believe their rights under the CEDAW are protected and promoted within shari'a law. Lebanese women desire greater wealth to improve their happiness in life. Less than a majority of Lebanese women are homemakers, while 50% of women are either participating in the workforce (30%) or unable to find a job (20%). Among the working respondents, virtually all respondents from Lebanon receive their wages directly. In regard to household finances, women in Lebanon are more likely to be the primary decision-maker for daily-needs purchases. Only a small percentage of Lebanese women live in a situation where the spouse controls the household financial savings. In most cases, Lebanese women participate in instances of joint-savings, separate savings or even no savings. The majority of women voted in the last national election or referendum. Also, the study finds that women in Lebanon do not see their gender as an obstacle to receiving health care. Finally, Lebanese women are avid consumers of television news.

Syrian women also find no contradiction between their CEDAW rights within shari'a law. However, they desire little in the way of personal wealth, instead focusing more on improving health and education. Syrian women primarily serve the role of homemaker and a combined 61% of these women desire better education and better health as opposed to greater personal wealth. Those who are employed tend to receive their wages directly. When it comes to household finances, Syrian women appear to exercise a great deal of influence. Over half possess sole or joint-control over the household savings. Again, more than half possess sole or joint-control over decision-making regarding the purchase of daily-needs items. Large numbers of Syrian women vote, while an extremely large portion does not see their gender as a hindrance to receiving health care. Like their Lebanese counterparts, Syrian women mostly rely upon television as a source of news.

In summary, Lebanese *and* Syrian women appear to exercise a great deal of freedom in the public and private space. The data shows that Syrian women appear to perceive their status in a positive light. They appear to exercise just as many freedoms in the private and public space as Lebanese women. With such different histories in the wake of the French colonial mandate period, we might expect large differences in the status of women between each country. On the

one hand, one might expect women in Lebanon to enjoy greater status due to the country's cosmopolitan, pluralist socio-political framework. On the other hand, one might expect women in Syria to enjoy a lesser degree of freedom due in large part to the increased role of Islam in the public and private space, as well as repressive state tactics. However, it appears that the Syrian regime success in promoting ideals of national unity and equality has translated into small improvements in women's status.

As shown earlier, the Syrian government's tendency to promote women's rights is not a new phenomenon and is hardly surprising considering the government's effort to promote ideals of equality and national unity. The role of Islam in society is as prevalent in Syria, as it is in other Arab countries; however, the relationship between the state and citizen makes Syria an interesting case study. As one scholar notes, "...the Syrian state has succeeded in creating a national identity by which individual citizens feel a social responsibility for the state."<sup>51</sup> Syria's long-standing focus on statist policies in the wake of colonialism may in large part explain this "burden-sharing" among citizens, male and female alike, thus allowing for improved opportunities for women to operate in the political landscape. It may also explain why Syrian women tend to focus less on amassing greater wealth, instead desiring improved education and better health.

Syria's endorsement of the above-mentioned Conventions, as well as the CEDAW in 2002, indicate a willingness on the part of the Syrian government to protect the rights of women regardless of prevailing religious and cultural influences, including the observance of shari'a. According to a UN report,

"The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has taken a number of legislative measures to limit discrimination against women, including the promulgation of Act No. 42 of 2003 establishing the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs as a governmental body tasked, inter alia, with: reviewing discriminatory laws and proposing either their amendment or new laws; proposing amendment of the articles relating to the age of custody contained in the Personal Status Act No. 18 of 2003; proposing amendment of the articles on social insurance contained in Act No. 78 of 2001 so as to give women the right to bequeath their pension to their heirs; seeking an increase in the maternity leave under Legislative Decree No. 35 of 2002; and seeking ratification of the agreement to establish the Arab Women's Organization, signed in Cairo on 15 July 2002."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> S.L. Sparre. "Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?" *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2008): pp. 3-20 (p.14).

<sup>52</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. "Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Initial Report of States: Syria, (29 August 2005): p.11.

It appears that some religious elements are also working to improve the status of women in Syria by reconciling secular law with shari'a. Abu-Lughod (1998) asserts that in the late 90's some scholars noted an increasing trend of liberalization towards women's issues among religious clerics. Islamists began to call for women to enter the public space to receive a better education.<sup>53</sup> Public opinion surveys from the early 1990's show Islamist females adopting what would be considered feminist positions regarding the role of women in public life.<sup>54</sup>

Case in point, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs conducted four workshops, in 2005, aimed at reexamining the legitimacy of the Syrian government's reservations with Article 15, paragraph 4. The opinion of the religious leaders participating in these workshops was that Article 15, paragraph was not incompatible with shari'a. In addition, the Syrian Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun stated that honor crimes were wrong, and requested that the Minister of Justice set up a committee to amend the current laws addressing honor crimes.<sup>55</sup>

Yet other UN reports indicate that Syria lags in its efforts to improve the status of women mainly due to strong cultural forces: "Culture and traditions still play an important role in depriving women from enjoying their legal and sometimes religious rights such as in the case of inheritance."<sup>56</sup> In both countries we find the existence of a dichotomy of statist male-oriented politics competing against the Islamic oppositions' belief in maintaining the nation's cultural authenticity. These competing discourses often placed women in a conundrum where any notions of improving their status proved to be forgotten. Sparre notes that Islam has played an "increased role" in the private and public spheres of all levels of Syrian society despite repressive state tactics.<sup>57</sup> The same is true for Lebanon where competing factions, religious and non-religious, reinforced a notion of patriarchy in the political system

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<sup>53</sup> Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998 p. 252.

<sup>54</sup> See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, as well as Mervat Hatem's "Economic and Political Liberalization". Abu-Lughod refers to these works in Abu-Lughod, Lila. "The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics." In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998 p. 252.

<sup>55</sup> See: Amnesty International USA, "2008 Annual Report for Syria"  
<<http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport.php?id=ar&yr=2008&c=SYR>> (November 2009).

<sup>56</sup> "Toolkit: The Importance of Gender Mainstreaming in Syria." *UNDP: BDP Global Project*. Online  
<<http://www.pogar.org/publications/other/undp/gender/syria-gender-toolkit-06e.pdf>> (21 April 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid p.9.



Women in Syria may be more likely to connect their role in society with the progress of the state. Government leaders based their rule on a strict form of secular nationalism that slowly relaxed as Islamic forces also gained a foothold in public debates about government, personal development, and society. In exchange for legitimacy, the government allowed Islamic discourses to enter the public space; however, the citizens were also provided with a number of social services. Special emphasis was placed on educating a viable workforce regardless of gender, and providing low food prices along with improved infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> This social contract formed the backbone of its legitimacy. Women played an important role in this give-and-exchange between the government and its citizens. Essentially, Syria adopted an official rhetoric of unity and nationalism as being essential to the country's survival.<sup>59</sup>

For Lebanon, while a high percentage of women believe their rights under the CEDAW are well protected (very or somewhat). A smaller percentage of respondents believe their rights are “very well protected” in comparison to Syria. Unlike Syria, women in Lebanon also tend to have a greater desire for money and income, whereas their Syrian counterparts were more likely to believe that no change is necessary to make them happier in life. Interestingly enough, Syria lags behind Lebanon in GDP per capita ranking; however, Syrian respondents are less likely than Lebanese respondents to desire an increase in wealth.

In line with arguments made by Khatib regarding the restraints imposed on Lebanese women when attempting to participate in political life, Lebanese women are less likely (although a majority) to have voted in the last national election or referendum, unlike Syria where three-quarters of women in the sample voted in the last election.

Lebanon's pluralistic society appears to preclude a strong sense of a national identity among its citizens. It could be argued that the current political and social framework is far too fragmented to promote ideals of common unity. In this sense, women's status may continue to be subordinated to paternal authority in the current civic order. Khatib notes that the constant effects of war and in-fighting translated into negative effects on Lebanese women, ultimately reinforcing notions of patriarchy in the political system: “Women in Lebanon are often perceived as enjoying a better status than their sisters in other Arab countries, whether economically or politically... However, behind this façade lies a patriarchal legislative, social

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<sup>58</sup> S.L. Sparre. “Educated Women in Syria: Servants of the State, or Nurturers of the Family?” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring 2008): pp. 3-20 (p.6).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid p.7.

and political system where women do not enjoy an equal status to men.”<sup>60</sup> These complexities help in part to explain why Syria female attitudes are much more closely aligned to attitudes among Lebanese women. The constant “tug-of-war” between competing forces in each country may have allowed for unique opportunities for women to renegotiate their status at times, while at other times women suffered marginalization at the hands of political and religious leaders.

Finally, religion appears to have a limited impact on female perceptions with the exception of a few areas. The results reveal a few interesting differences emerging between various religious groups with respect to CEDAW rights, work status, and household finances. Future research should explore this impact more in-depth.

### *Conclusion*

This study suggests that women in Syria and Lebanon are not only exercising rights in the public and private spheres, but that women in Syria hold similar opinions and perceptions as their Lebanese counterparts. Both countries have entered previous reservations to certain CEDAW articles contradictory to the spirit and purpose of the Convention. Despite this, it appears that women in each country perceive an ability to exercise their rights in everyday life.

This finding likely stems from the effects of competing secular and non-secular male-dominated discourses found in the Syrian and Lebanese political landscapes. Conventional wisdom holds that Syrian women’s rights were often sacrificed on the altar of statism and national unity or religiously-inspired cultural authenticity. At times though, leading voices in the Syrian political and religious landscape advocated for improvements in the status women. Despite attempts by groups in Lebanon to promote a more pluralistic Western-model of society, women’s status was often ignored in the fray caused by competing political and religious groups. As a result, opinions among women in the two countries are much closer than one might have predicted.

As suggested by Thompson, this dual system continues in both Syria and Lebanon. However, Lebanon’s future is more precarious due to the lack of a strong central government. The violent nature of the Lebanese political system in the last three decades has made it difficult for women to advance the cause of women’s rights. The data here suggest that women are, in fact, emerging

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<sup>60</sup> Khatib, Lina. “Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol.35, No. 3 (December 2008), pp. 437-438.



D<sup>3</sup> Systems

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from a trap that forced Lebanese women into a “culture of passivity and self-denial.”<sup>61</sup> Despite strong state policies and a mobilized Islamist opposition, women in Syria appear to be avoiding a similar fate.

To conclude, the Syrian and Lebanese case studies offers a fascinating glimpse into societies shaped by secular and non-secular forces. The constant tensions between competing forces in each country worked for and against women in their effort to expand their rights. History reveals that the marginalization of women’s status is a shared feature of both systems, especially in the last thirty years. Therefore, it’s not surprising we see similar results.

Further research should continue to observe the status of women in Syria and Lebanon, as competing discourses continue to shape the country’s political and social landscape. As mentioned earlier, it may be possible that the gap between policy and practice, as well as positive perceptions about female status, are narrowing in both countries. Despite past marginalization, there is evidence in both the data and the literature that policy-makers in Lebanon, Syria, and the global community have positively influenced the status of women. Policy-makers should take notice of the marginalization of women in past debates and continue to develop rhetoric into meaningful policy. The difficult question is determining who should be influenced and figuring out to what extent policy-makers in each country want to be influenced.

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<sup>61</sup> See Phillips (1991). Khatib, Lina. “Gender, Citizenship and Political Agency in Lebanon.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol.35, No. 3 (December 2008), p. 450.



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