



**GIRLS
GET EQUAL**

Assessing Civil Society, Gender Politics, and Youth Movements in Lebanon

Context Analysis, June 2020



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ACRONYMS

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Queer
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present document is an executive summary for a study conducted by EDS for Plan International. The study is a critical assessment of Lebanon's civil society and its gender dynamics, with a focus on access to rights and youth groups. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, the methodology was changed from focus group discussions (FGDs) and face-to-face interviews to an in-depth desk review and 35 remote interviews with gender experts, legal practitioners, youth and feminist activists, and CSO members. The study adopted a cross-cutting approach, considering conflict sensitivity, gender, climate change, and the media.

The study was organized into four main sections which analyse:

- civil society and its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats;
- youth activism and its particular challenges;
- access to rights;
- Lebanese law and legal frameworks affecting gender equality and civil society at large.

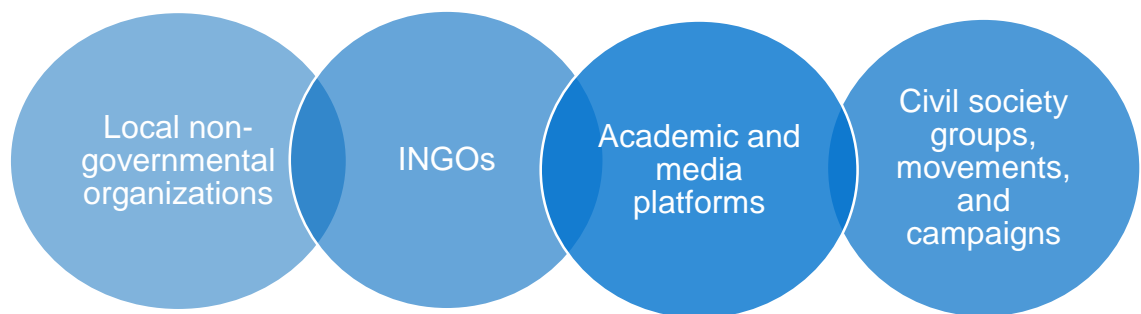
The study was developed between March 2020 and June 2020 by Nur Turkmani and Giulia Sobrero, with the support of the Economic Development Solutions (EDS) team for Plan International. The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Plan International.

CIVIL SOCIETY ANALYSIS

Definitions

Civil society is quite broad and has multiple definitions depending on the context, purpose of its usage, and setting. Notably, ambiguity surrounding civil society exists across the world although there is general global consensus that it “refers to a wide array of organizations: community groups, (international) non-governmental organizations, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations” (World Bank, 2020). In the Lebanese context, the notion of “Civil Society” primarily on non-sectarian civil society movements, associations, and organizations.

Civil society in Lebanon can be divided into four categories:



Strengths

- NGO members are increasingly critical and seek to evaluate and monitor their practices with a more detailed eye and with the aim of becoming more impactful and effective.
- INGOs and NGOs are mandated to mainstream gender equality in most of their projects. Similarly, this is a prerequisite of donor and IOs’ requirements, but has also been adopted and, in many cases, also spearheaded by local organizations.
- Interventions are taking place on a more decentralized and localized level, with an increased focus on community and grassroots interventions.
- A number of CSOs are actively seeking to incorporate values of intersectionality within their projects and interventions.

Weaknesses

- CSOs in Lebanon have historically been criticized for speaking a language that is exclusive and dominated by highly educated Beirut-centred secular activists.
- Because of stifled funding and constricted donor requirements, NGOs in Lebanon tend to compete with one another over funding – which, in many cases, leads them to distance themselves from their original values, in a bid to secure funding.
- Interviewees also noted a recurring weakness in their mobilization and work is that they were often burnt out and exhausted, given how draining their work could be, the scarcity of short-term rewards, the issue of time constraints, and the forces constantly working against us.
- CSOs experience report limited cooperation by the government with them. There is also a lack of agreement among CSOs themselves on whether to cooperate with the government.

Opportunities

- It is relatively easy to form an association. The 1909 Ottoman Law of Associations, although archaic, is rather enabling for CSOs and provides a nurturing environment for CSOs to be formed, to provide services, and to work on activities.
- Civil society has, to a large extent, gained the trust of many communities and groups in Lebanon, as a non-sectarian political actor. CSOs have a stronger grassroots base and their demands are becoming more politicized and grounded in legal, socioeconomic, and political reforms.
- More coverage by alternative media platforms. This contrasts with Lebanon's previous media scene, which has historically been dominated by the ruling elite.
- Recent events have enabled more alliance-building between different CSOs and activists with common values, on environmental, economic, political, social, and gender issues.

Threats

- Lebanon's confessional system of power sharing reinforces patronage networks and loyalties, thereby creating fragmented interests. Ultimately, this affects CSOs' capacity to influence change and redirect its efforts.

- Interviewees note the tendency of INGOs and donors to work with larger well-known local NGOs, excluding smaller groups from decision-making processes.
- The politically volatile environment that CSOs operate in – from political void, security issues, the Syrian refugee crisis and the government’s delay in responding to it, regional turmoil and interference – create multiple obstacles for advocacy efforts towards policy making and the ability to push forward for changes.
- Over the past year (2019-2020), Lebanon’s worsening economic and financial crisis has affected CSOs’ access to funds and ability to pay employees and suppliers.
- Interviewees highlight a shrinking civic space, which continues to create insurmountable threats to refugees, members of the LGBTQ community, migrants, and activists.

YOUTH GROUPS

Youth Situation

Youth in Lebanon (15-29)¹, who make up approximately 27.4% of Lebanon’s population, face a multitude of issues, including rampant unemployment; lack of access to public spaces; a highly privatized schooling system and the weak infrastructure of public schools leading to education inequality; SGBV and heightened sense of insecurity amongst both male and female youth (UNDP, 2015). Amidst all these challenges, youth in Lebanon appear to be disenfranchised from formal political processes, and are not included in policy decisions about matters that concern them (Harb, 2016).

“[They] always talk about how youth are important and rising stars, but when we actually want to say what is best for us, do they even listen? Or are we only “the real deal” when we are quiet?”

A youth activist from Tripoli, North Lebanon.

A plethora of NGOs focus on youth unemployment as one of the key struggles facing youth; hence, they focus on providing them with training sessions, life-skills training, on-the-job placement, and other efforts to prepare them to enter the labor market. However, the problem as stated by one of the interviewees, especially for Palestinians and Syrians, is that “they go to all these training sessions and end up with no jobs”.

¹ This age range is as per the definition of the Lebanese Ministry of Youth and Sport, in addition to UN agencies (UNESCO, 2012; UNDP, 2015).

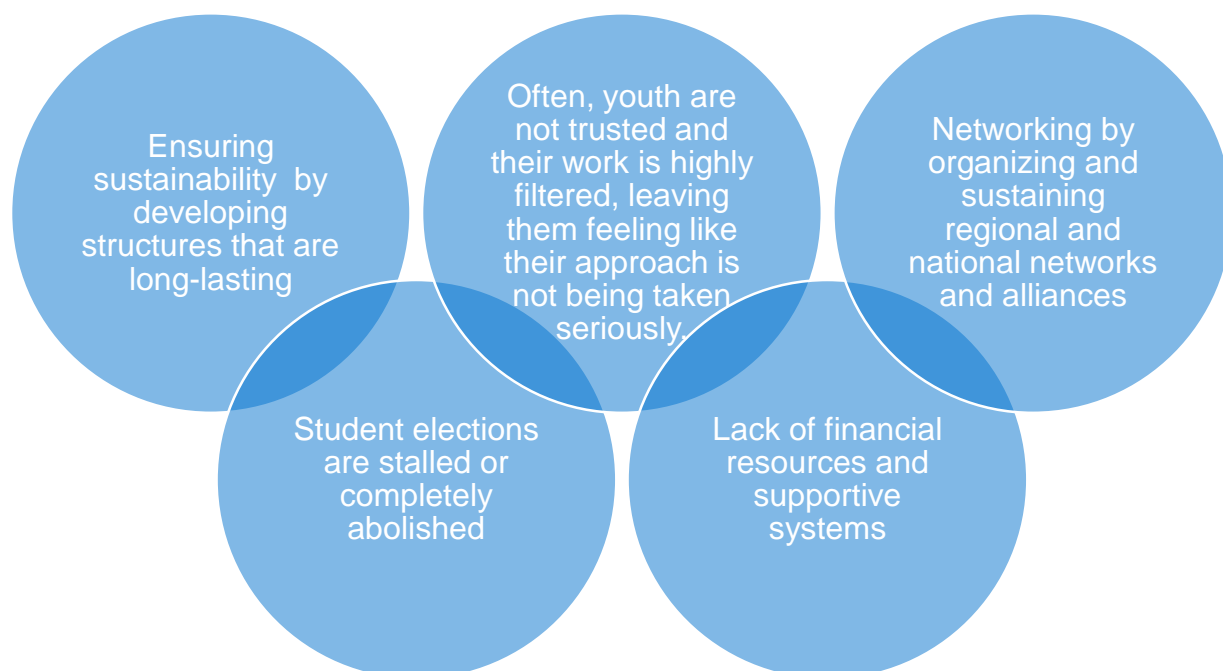
Youth Activism and Groups

In response to that feeling of helplessness, many youth have been taking matters into their own hands through forming groups and networks, organizing student coalitions, volunteering, and using social media to shed light on the core issues affecting them. Since October 2019, youth, including high school and university students, have been increasingly visible at the frontline of demonstrations, voicing their demands with regards to education and employment, but also political change.

However, the discussion of youth activism must consider how a significant number of youths in Lebanon feel detached from such pursuits of youth political reform and activism. Syrian and Palestinian youth face multiple layers of marginalization. In addition to facing the general challenges Lebanese youth face, they also are subjected to additional structural challenges given their socioeconomic situation, refugee status, and political and legal circumstances. As such, their ability to be part of youth movements and engage in change is much more limited than that of Lebanese.

Challenges

Some of the main challenges specifically faced by youth groups and movements, based on interviewees and analysis of data gathered, are outlined below:



GENDER ISSUES: LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Lebanese legal framework is far from guaranteeing gender equality. Laws and protection mechanisms that should enshrine equal rights to all human beings are either partial, distorted, not enforced, or weak.

At the international level, Lebanon has joined and ratified many international legal frameworks that enshrine human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1972) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1972). However, protection mechanisms required to assure the respect and the compliance of the Lebanese State to international treaties are weak, not respected, or not implemented.

Moreover, Lebanon has not yet ratified or joined some other fundamental international agreements or their optional protocols, such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Refugee Convention (1951) and its Protocols and the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court.

On a regional level, Lebanon ratified several Arab legal frameworks, such as the Arab Charter on Human Rights (2008) that established the Arab Human Rights Committee and the «Arab Strategy on Women, Security and Peace» in 2012, followed by the «Cairo Declaration on Arab Women in 2013», can be considered as «the agenda for Arab women beyond 2015». However, despite the general achievement, the actual implementation and protection mechanisms put in place by the single Arab states are also weak and ineffective.

In terms of national legal frameworks, the personal status laws and the nationality are flagrant examples of the ways in which the law discriminates against women and girls based on their gender. Moreover, the criminal law does not provide an overarching definition that covers all forms of violence against women. It does not indicate all types of gender-based violence and is thus not comprehensive. The lack of provisions criminalizing gender-based violence is a major gap that prevents the Lebanese legal system from improving gender equality. Thus far, GBV is only mentioned in Law No. 293 on Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence, which was adopted in 2014. However, the proposed law was dramatically amended before being adopted; several forms of violence against women, including sexual harassment, are not defined in the adopted law as they were in the original design, and are narrowed down to domestic violence. Additionally, there is the need to amend the labor law and the penal code and to adopt an extensive definition of sexual violence in the Lebanese law system

that can cover all forms of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, and that can apply to all women without any distinction.

However, it is worth pointing out that there are a number of **national policies, strategies, and action plans implemented** to strengthen gender equality, such as the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) that was established in 1998 to deal with women's affairs with advisory, coordination and executive power; the Department of Women's Affairs within the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA); the National Strategy for the Protection of all Children from all forms of Violence, Abuse and Neglect, approved in 2012; and the 2015 "Beirut Declaration on Ending Child Marriage".

ACCESS TO RIGHTS

On top of the legal discriminations that women face, the lack of access to knowledge and information of their rights and protection mechanisms, as well as the costs of legal services and procedures (both for religious as well as for civil courts), limit their **access to justice**. Indeed, due to the Lebanese legal system structure, women must multiply their actions among religious and civil jurisdictions to address criminal, sectarian and civil issues, which also multiply the costs. Despite the private initiative of the Bar association to establish the "legal aid" service, the lack of human and financial resources, as well as the poor knowledge and understanding of this service — amongst legal actors themselves — make the service itself poor.

In terms of **access to quality education**, the Lebanese education system is divided in two: the private and the public system. Contrary to many private schools, public schools suffer from a lack of funds, poor and outdated pedagogical and educational methods, and materials, which consequently result in poor learning outcomes. The Syrian crisis has incredibly aggravated the capacity of Lebanese primary and secondary public schools, which – due to the high number of Syrian children registering in schools – has had to increase the number of children per class and adopt second shift classes.

In terms of SRHR, the Country Assessment of Sexual and Reproductive Rights (UNFPA, 2019) highlights that, despite the fact that Lebanon has ratified many international conventions that aim to protect and guarantee those rights linked to sexual and reproductive health, the understanding and knowledge of these rights within Lebanon and the state's compliance to the international framework of human rights is not consistent. This is mainly due to the link between SRH rights and the sectarian Lebanese system, in addition to social norms, culture and gender inequality; the fact that some laws criminalize practices, which are necessary to guarantee SRH rights; the lack of a comprehensive sexual health education, even among healthcare workers; the lack of coordination and engagement of all ministries that should be involved in SRH; and the fact that CSOs that are either promoting and/or providing SRH services are not supported on an institutional level, because SRH rights and services are sensitive areas that require an effective legal framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, a number of recommendations have been developed for Plan International and other actors who work towards supporting local NGOs, youth groups, and organizations working towards gender equality.

- Ensuring that all the international recommendations provided by international bodies are disseminated and shared among CSOs working on gender equality and women empowerment.
- Shedding light on the National Strategy to End Child Marriage developed by the Higher Council, and strengthening CSOs' capacity to advocate for the recognition of an optional civil marriage law.
- Joining efforts with and supporting other CSOs to reform the personal status law campaign such as raising the child custody age as appropriate.
- Advocating on: the improvement of women's access to justice at all levels, ending of violent behaviour in public schools, and the importance of access to SRHR information and services as well as supporting the introduction of a comprehensive sexual education in Lebanese and refugees' curricula.
- Contributing to breaking down the most harmful barriers that prevent vulnerable girls, particularly adolescent girls, from attending school, such as child marriage and violence.
- Organizations should focus on strengthening CSOs' capacity at different levels to provide SRH services.
- Advocating for reducing the age for forming and joining a CSO, under the 1909 Ottoman Law, from 20 to 18.
- Supporting youth groups with the formation of meaningful and non-hierarchical alliances and coalitions across the country.
- Helping connect youth groups to other existing networks in Lebanon focusing on climate change, the environment, and alternative economic structures.
- Providing training on innovative and critical forms of research, such as the feminist participatory action research (FPAR).
- Encouraging youth groups and other CSOs to lobby for student elections to take place at universities in a democratic and timely manner.

- Supporting CSOs to capitalize on social media platforms and training youth on how to provide alternative and critical content regarding the issues they care about.
- Supporting youth groups with liaising with other youth networks in the region, such as the Manara Regional Network.
- Connecting feminist groups with both alternative and mainstream media platforms for knowledge production and dissemination.
- Supporting newly established local NGOs with gender equality and child protection policies, in addition to supporting the opening of safe spaces for debate and discussions amongst various groups, across nationalities and gender.