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WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN THE WORKFORCE POST- HIGHER EDUCATION

Case studies on Jordan, Syria and Lebanon

ABOUT POLITICS4HER:

Politics4Her is an intersectional feminist platform & youth-led movement advocating for the inclusive participation of young women and girls in politics. Politics4Her works to broaden dialogue and to bring international human rights into practice through advising policymakers and states by bringing international best ideas. Politics4Her strives to contribute to a more equitably governed world by democratizing national laws and legislation.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM:

The Young Feminist Scholars Programme is meant for any student who is extremely passionate about feminism and gender issues. The goal will be for each scholar to deliver a report specializing on a region in the world covering issues related to gender-based violence and/or women's political participation. Our two criteria for our scholars are to identify as international feminists (regardless of their gender) and most importantly to be able to showcase leadership. Scholars get to work in research, writing, policy as well as communications advocacy. Our main goal is for them to explore these different fields and see what they are most interested in while offering them guidance and mentorship so that it potentially helps them launch their early career.

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TRIGGER WARNING:

Please note that since this policy brief includes words and phrases that should be avoided, you may come across some that you consider discriminatory or that have been used historically to oppress certain people or groups. These may cause distress to people who have experienced discrimination on the basis of their identity. Given the nature of this policy brief, we understand that many of the issues it discusses are personal and emotive for many people. While naming oppressions is necessary to deconstruct them, we recognize that this can take a toll on those directly affected. Please take care in the reading of the policy brief and prioritize your wellbeing.

Current Context

1



While women's inclusion in university has been steadily increasing over the last 20 years in the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region, there is a clear disparity when it comes to their participation in the workforce.

Universities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria boast impressive and at times majority of female student enrollment, however in no country is more than 25% of the female population active in the workforce.

There are several factors that begin even in the universities that contribute to this underrepresentation, such as cultural norms about women's societal duties to be a mother and wife, laws that disenfranchise women and give the power of deciding whether or not they can have a career to their husbands, and the lacking infrastructure that disproportionately affects women. This policy report will examine those cultural, economic, and social components and advise on potential solutions.

Women, Education and the Economy

2

For women, economic opportunities are historically restricted, yet vital to securing autonomy and ensuring quality of life. Access to higher education allows women in the SWANA region to access opportunities outside of the traditional roles of being a mother and wife. This university education is important to achieving higher rates of women in professional and leadership positions and over the last 20 years, commendable strides have been made for their inclusion in academic spaces. In pre-civil war Syria, women made up half of the student body[1] and in Jordan and Lebanon, female students currently make up over 50%[2] of the student population thanks to shifting cultural norms, opportunities such as scholarships, and the steady fight for women's rights in the countries. However, there are still challenges that echo into their careers.

Many of the pressures that are barriers to entry from universities intensify over time, as well as new obstacles that emerge and create a disproportionate underrepresentation in the workforce. Despite the increased access to education for women in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, there are very low rates of women in the workforce. An important factor for this is the social expectations of becoming wives and mothers and the gender roles that come along with it, such as withdrawing from public life, which is still heavily influential in these cultures, as well as the lack of adequate childcare for mothers who do work. There is also a heavy stigma around women working in certain fields, such as STEM or physical occupations, and stereotypes that affect employers' decisions to hire women. Sexual and gender-based harassment is a prevailing issue throughout a woman's career which is exacerbated by a lack of safe and reliable transportation.

[1] ICEF Monitor

[2] USAID, GENDER ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LEBANON

Image: New York Times, In Jordan, Educated Women Face Shortage of Jobs





Image: Mercy Corps

Methodology

The majority of the data for this study has been collected through UN data and specifically the UN women's commission investigating women's access to education and jobs in the Middle East. By analyzing the raw statistics alongside the factors that contribute to the disparity between women in university vs in the labor force, a fuller picture of the complex problem can be considered.

Additionally, interviews conducted with women from Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon who provide first-hand accounts of the education and job situation in these countries and their suggestions will provide support to the statistics.

"We can still see a lot of men requiring their wives not to work to free themselves for the house and for the kids and a lot of women agree on that just to get married. This is unfortunately a very common case."

Jordanian Consultant, 23

As women's rights expand and take on different shapes around the world, a major hurdle in the way of ensuring full autonomy for half of the world's population is the ability to earn an independent income. In the SWANA region, women's access to first, education, and then sustainable jobs are key steps in reducing the cycles of abuse, poverty, and illiteracy. However, there are many barriers due to existing cultural, religious, and infrastructural aspects that restrict women's access to a career. These problems have been highlighted by global and regional organizations in the last decades and due to the determination of women in the SWANA area, major leaps have been taken in the last 20 years and the number of female students enrolled in universities has had an impressive increase.



Image: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

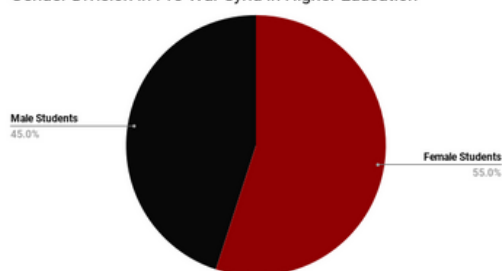
All three countries have experienced social and economic turmoil in the last decade that contributes to this issue. Syria, once a model of prosperity in the region, has been engaged in a Civil War since 2011, devastating their infrastructure and forcing citizens to focus on survival rather than education and careers. In Lebanon, the 2020 explosion in the capital's shipping port decimated the economic and political stability that was vital in securing futures for Lebanese women. Due to the crises in surrounding countries, Jordan has become the primary receiver of refugees, straining their infrastructure and economy to the detriment of many citizens. In periods of crisis and instability, women are the first to lose their already scarce jobs, opportunities, and freedoms. While women in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon are more educated than ever, that inclusion in higher education is not translating to their numbers in the workforce.

What are women's opportunities for higher education?

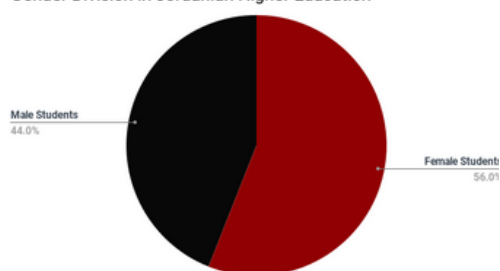
5

Since 2001, the rates of female students enrolling in university in Lebanon and Jordan have been rising, and demonstrating their dedication and success in higher education, women now make up 54%^[3] and 56%^[4] of the student body respectively. Pre-civil war Syria also followed this trajectory with over half of the student body^[5] being female however, the current governmental and economic instability has resulted in severely slashed numbers of students. Women are interested in pursuing education and careers outside of traditional norms, however, they still face barriers to their graduation that parallel the roadblocks later in life that often keep them out of the workforce.

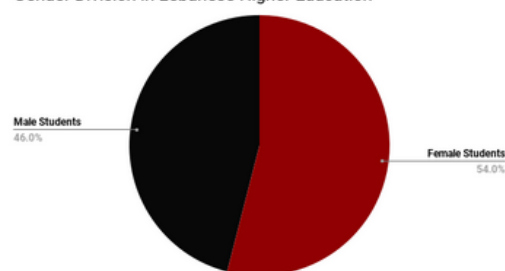
Gender Division in Pre-War Syria in Higher Education



Gender Division in Jordanian Higher Education



Gender Division in Lebanese Higher Education



In Jordan, 48%^[6] of female students reported that prevailing customs negatively impacted female enrollment. For the women that do make it into the classrooms, there is a distinct separation between fields of study. Social factors sequester them into three main fields, education, health and welfare, and arts and humanities, with the lowest numbers being in STEM and engineering^[7]. While women may be permitted to attend university, they are still forced to work within the cultural norms of women taking the position of nurturer. In the universities, women make up less than 10% of teachers and administration, which contributes to a culture of women (having to accept bad treatment due to their gender).

Overall, 97%^[8] of female students report active discrimination due to being a woman, such as being given fewer opportunities and facing consequences for rejecting sexual advances. However, there have also been many steps taken by the government and universities to encourage female enrollment, such as gender and economic class-specific scholarships. In spite of the challenges, women have flocked to higher education and are slowly changing the areas of study deemed appropriate for them.

[3] Monthly Magazine, Women of Lebanon Statistics

[4] Jordan News, 56% of students in Jordanian universities are women

[5] Tahrir Institute, Syrian Female students struggle with 'information Gap

[6] Spencer, Rachael A., et al. "Adapting and Validating the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire to Study Sexual Harassment Among University Women in Jordan."

[7] Central Administration of Statistics, Education in Lebanon

[8] Spencer, Rachael A., et al. "Adapting and Validating the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire to Study Sexual Harassment Among University Women in Jordan."



Where do educated women go?

Despite the increasingly high rates of women attending university in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, there is a stark decline when it comes to women in the workforce post-education. Jordan and Syria's employment numbers demonstrate severe problems, with only 13%^[9] and 16%^[10] of women respectively active in the workforce. Lebanon has slightly higher rates at 25%^[11] of women having a job, however, this still shows a massive disparity from much more statistically balanced universities. While there are many social, political, and economic factors that contribute to this problem, the three main barriers that prevent women from joining the workforce, are societal patriarchal norms and gender roles, gender-based violence, and limited opportunities.

Percentage of Female Population in Labor Force

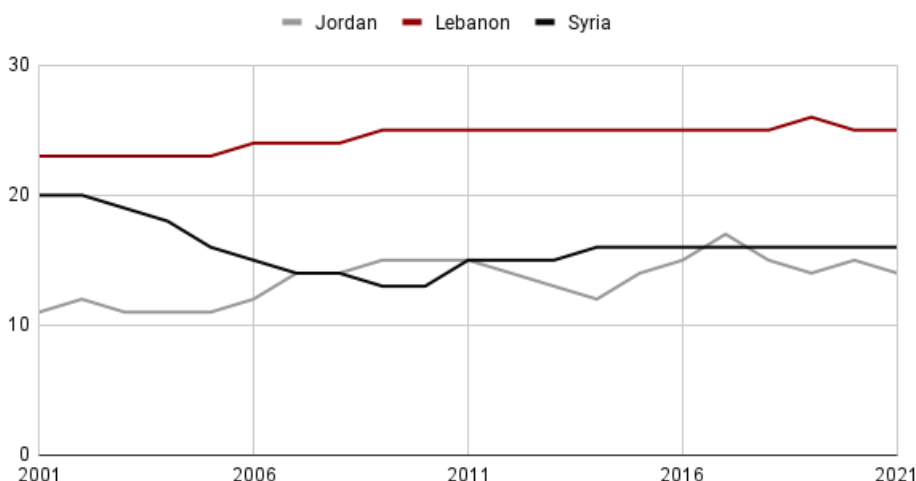
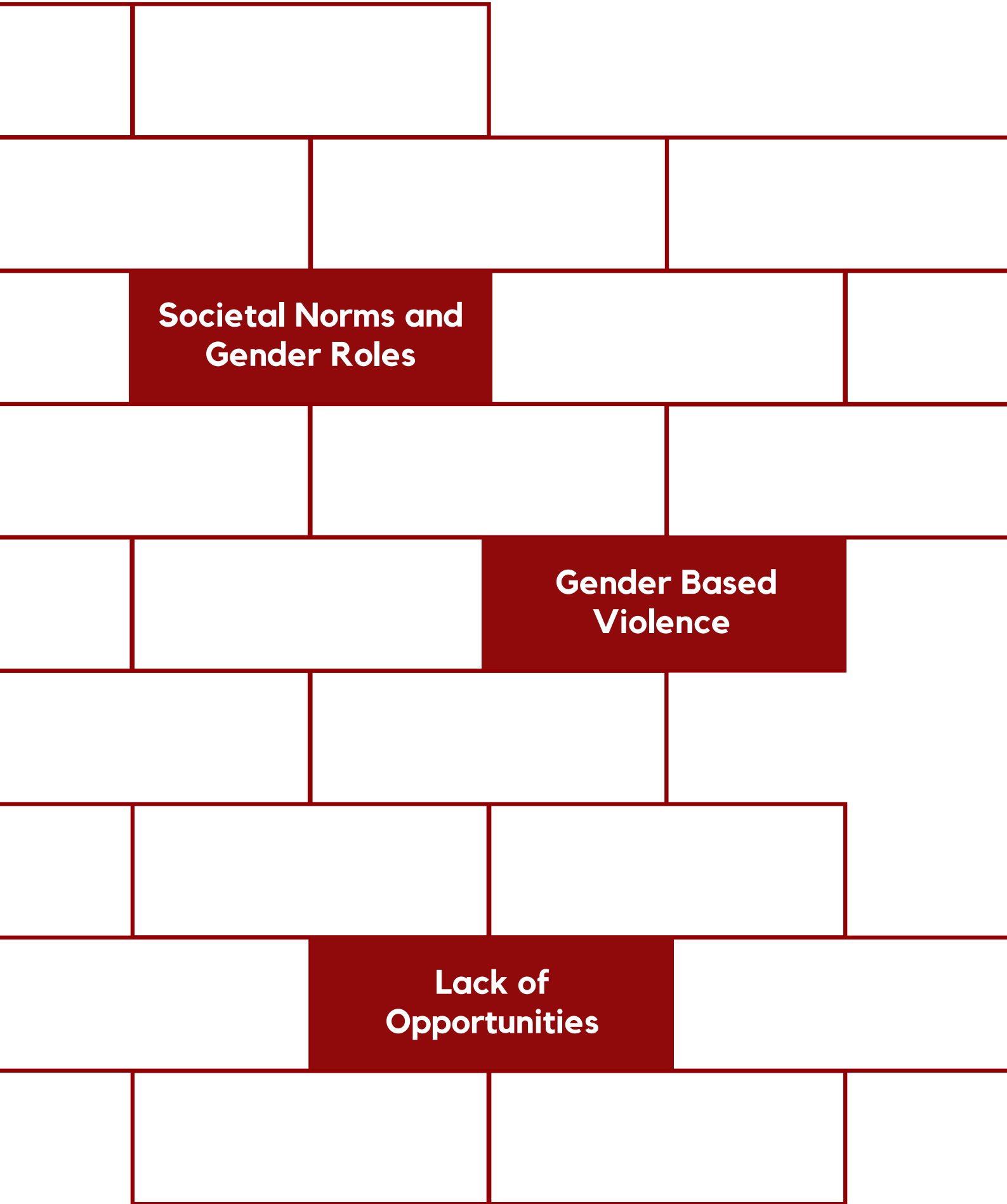


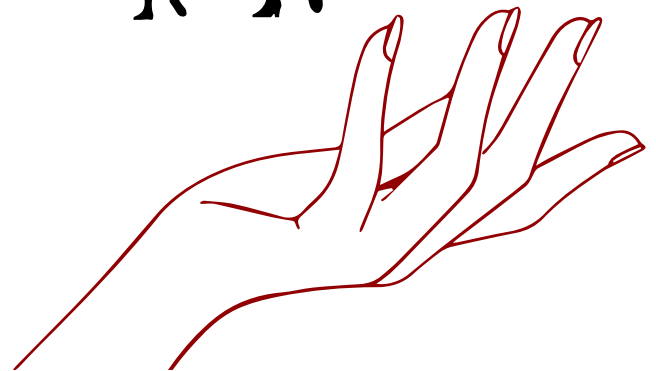
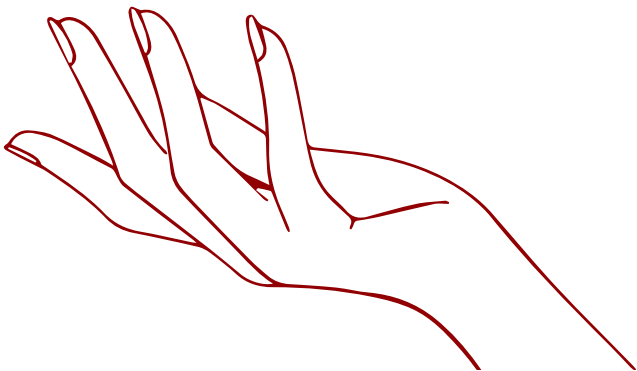
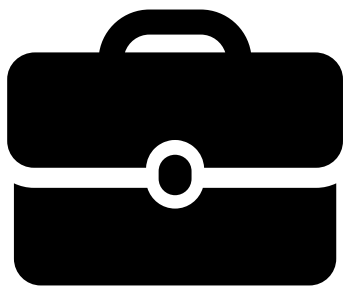
Image: Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative
 [9] The World Bank Data, Jordan
 [10] The World Bank Data, Syrian Arab Republic
 [11] The World Bank Data, Lebanon



Societal Norms and Gender Roles

Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon are all deeply Muslim and patriarchal societies where women are expected to follow strict gender expectations and norms. The woman's place is considered to be the home, caring for her husband and raising the children and girls are expected to put these family responsibilities above all else. While some families may be supportive of receiving a higher education, many women find that despite their degrees, they are still expected to immediately focus all energy on building a family.

Being educated and having a job can be seen as a detriment to finding a spouse, with female family members often perpetuating these beliefs. For many women with university degrees, they are pressured into abandoning their careers before they even start and for those that do insist on having a career, they face a lot of judgment and criticism. Working women are often seen as bad mothers by abandoning their children and not fulfilling their social duties.



Gender Based Violence

Access to a job can be more difficult than just denying societal expectations as there are laws and institutions in these countries that uphold patriarchal control. For example, in the new Syrian Constitution written in 2012, men are lawfully allowed to forbid their wives from working, robbing them of financial autonomy. This perpetuates the cycles of abuse as women have few means of leaving bad and abusive relationships. Additionally, despite having jobs, working mothers are still considered the primary caregivers and with a lack of affordable childcare options, women with children have very limited options for jobs.



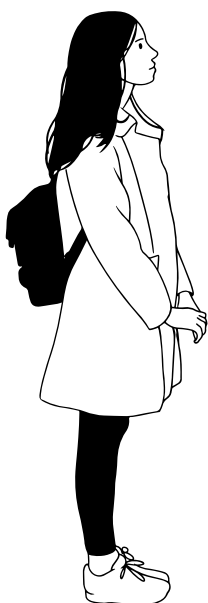
Safe and reliable transportation is also an issue in many cases, as working women often don't have access to personal cars and use public transport. However, this opens them up to potential harassment and assault, especially if coming home late. For women that find jobs despite these problems, the wages themselves can discourage participants. Female employees make significantly less than their male colleagues and often receive less benefits as well. Lower pay combined with the added costs of childcare and transportation can force women out of the workforce due to economic problems.

Lack of Opportunities

10

Due to the narrow field of study for women in universities, the job opportunities are slim and competitive. Banking, healthcare, and education are the primary fields of employment for women in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. This limits the diversity of opportunities for educated women and edges them almost entirely out of the private sector. Even within the government positions there are few opportunities for advancement as men fill out almost entirely the higher ranks of these careers.

Due to the lack of women in leading positions across all industries, there is a heightened problem of harassment and discrimination within the workplace. However, there is also a push for women to look outside of traditional jobs and break into male dominated fields. Many times the barriers to entry for these positions come from petty stereotypes and cultural traditions that claim that women are too weak or unskilled to perform certain jobs.



No

NO

NO

No!!

no

Some women are trying to fight these challenges and push against gender norms, such as Kinana Al-Bunni in Syria who is Damascus's only female taxi driver. The attitudes towards female drivers in the Middle East are overwhelmingly negative and limits their opportunities in fields that require it. She reports discrimination due to her position, yet was forced into it because of the difficult job market. She believes that to change these opinions, people simply need to see women capable of performing the jobs, and government help with enforcing gender equality and quotas can be a good step in getting more women into male-dominated fields and expanding their opportunities.

There is positive change taking place due to efforts from governments and social groups to include women more in the workforce. Asma Hasan, a Jordanian yoga instructor, spoke about her happiness to have her job and recognizes that only a few years ago it would not have been possible. Now, her gym is filled with female staff. However, when asked if she has experienced negative reactions from others due to her job, the response was "of course." Criticism surrounding not following traditional paths often comes from other women, demonstrating how pervasive these beliefs are.



Image: Kinana Al-Bunni from WION News



Image: Al-Fanar Media

Conclusion

Women in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon have incredible achievements to bring to their local workforces, however many social factors create barriers to their inclusion. Despite the increasing enrollment of female students in university, those numbers fail to translate to the workforce as women are expected to step away from their careers and prioritize their husbands and children. Additionally, hiring and employment discrimination in conjunction with field opportunities segregated to narrow options often without much power or social importance creates a lack of opportunity for the women who do choose to stay in the workforce. To support women's autonomy in these countries, the problems of reliable transportation, prevailing cultural gender expectations, and harassment must be addressed. We need to support them every step of the way and recognize that access to higher education isn't the only step in solving the problem.

Eliminate laws giving control of women's autonomy to men

The Syrian law allowing men to decide if their wives can work is not the only legal barrier to a career. Across all three countries' constitutions there are laws that privilege men in matters of inheritance, divorce, and custody which put women's autonomy in the hands of husbands or male family members. With this precedent set, women are afraid to go against cultural norms and work outside of the home for fear of repercussions. These laws are a direct barrier to women's free inclusion in the workforce and must be repealed.

Better childcare and transportation infrastructure

Women are severely limited with their employment options due to extra family and personal safety burdens from a patriarchal culture. With government investment in building reliable and safe public transportation, the whole country will benefit, but especially the women who want to work out of the home, but don't have access to cars. Additionally, affordable childcare centers for government employees would ensure that women can fill in public services jobs without having to juggle children as well. This would encourage more women to take part in their communities at every level, diversifying government and teaching young girls that women have a place in the conversation. Building strong and accessible childcare and transportation infrastructure are important steps that can be taken to promote and facilitate women's inclusion in the workforce.

Gender quotas in government positions

Without strong female role models and mentors for young Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese students, patriarchal and discriminatory norms are not challenged. Demonstrating and normalizing the capabilities of women in professional and administrative environments, especially at universities, is important for breaking negative stereotypes. By instating quotas for female staff at all government levels, women would be encouraged to join the workforce with less fear of harassment and negative cultural reactions, and find themselves in workspaces surrounded by other women. In Jordan, local parliamentary offices do enforce a basic quota of one woman per eighteen legislators; however this policy should be increased and expanded to other fields [12].

[12] Daraj Media



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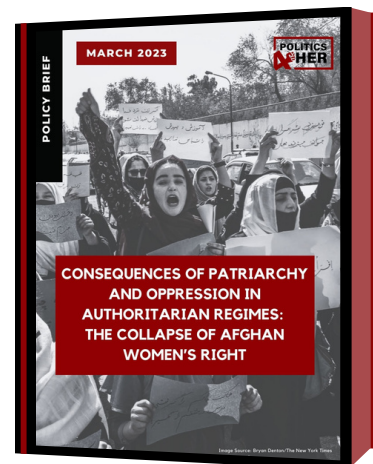
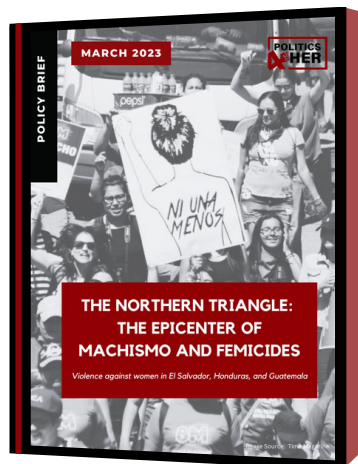
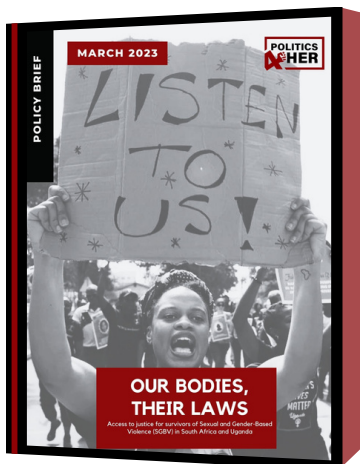
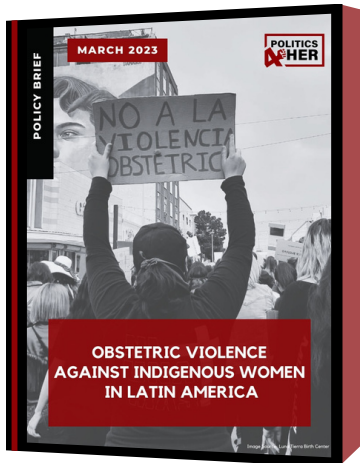
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OUR OTHER POLICY BRIEFS





We are committed to assisting and providing resources for young women to become active participants of politics, international affairs and diplomacy. **Ideas matter, they shape the world we live in.** So, we strive to build a community to allow us to raise our voices, promote our ideas and share our vision, empowering women to be part of the change.



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