

For Immediate Release



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Symposium at AUB addresses women's political participation in Lebanon

A group of engaged citizens convened at the American University of Beirut (AUB) for an invitation-only symposium focusing on women's participation and representation in Lebanese political life.

“Women in Public Life: A Gender Analysis of Lebanon's Sectarian Power-sharing System” was a collaboration between AUB's Knowledge is Power (KIP) project and the Gender Initiative, organized by two assistant professors, Dr. Carmen Geha, from the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, and Dr. Sara Mourad, from the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies.

The symposium brought together academics and students from a variety of disciplines with non-academics such as civil society representatives and political activists; journalists and filmmakers; legal experts and judges; and people from the public sector, including the international affairs advisor to the Prime Minister.

The format of the sessions was based on dialogue and interaction, which is why the organizers limited participation to a small group of invitees in order to have more focused and fruitful discussions. This informality made for a dynamic atmosphere where speakers and attendees shared their experiences and their knowledge, responding to and building on each other's thoughts.

The group came together to consider a series of questions regarding women in public life, with ‘political participation’ defined broadly. The three tracks of the symposium focused on the representation of women in government and parliament, but also on other forms of political participation such as within syndicates, civil society organizations, and social or protest movements. In addition, the participants tackled the issue of women in media and culture,

looking at questions such as how media has shaped public opinion on women's status and role in society and politics.

At the beginning of the symposium, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Nadia El Cheikh, introduced the co-organizers and discussed their contributions to teaching and research on gender at AUB, saying that they "bring so much value to what we do, by doing what they do." Dean El Cheikh went on to talk about the Gender Initiative, which she launched at AUB in fall 2016, appointing Dr. Mourad as its program coordinator.

"In addition to supporting and publicizing the minor in Gender Studies, the Initiative will provide an institutional framework for the consideration of curricular development at the graduate level, as well as the planning and implementation of gender-focused programming such as lecture series, internships with community partners, and conferences," said Dean El Cheikh.

Charlotte Karam, director of the KIP project and associate dean for programs at the Olayan School of Business, also spoke at the opening session, describing the journey of the past two years with the KIP project. Their first task was to identify key themes related to gender and sexuality in Lebanon, and one of these was the participation and representation of women and other marginalized groups in political life. Last year, KIP awarded 15 grants to conduct research and gather documentation related to their key themes. One grant was awarded to Dr. Geha to study women's political participation in Lebanon and this symposium marked the conclusion of that research project.

It was clear from the dialogue at this symposium that there is still much to be done before women become equal partners in Lebanese political life, but there was also a thread of hopefulness in the discussions that change is possible and that the work being done at AUB can contribute to this change.

"In this symposium, we are thinking about the structural issues that prevent women or hinder them from being active members of political parties, of labor unions, of protest movements, or social movements; but also recognizing how they have actually navigated these obstacles," said Dr. Mourad. "I feel like now... the discourse has changed, and AUB is actively taking part in this social change."

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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