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SHEDDING LIGHT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN LEBANON

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A Report on Media and Gender Monitoring of the 2023 Municipal Elections by the joint project "Marsad VAWP" between Maharat Foundation and Madanyat.

Contributors:

Madanyat: Nada ANID, Founder، Executive Director
Cyril BADAOUI, Project Coordinator, Legal Advisor
Nadine HAJJ HUSSEIN, Project Coordinator

Maharat Foundation: Roula MIKHAEL, Executive Director
Tony MIKHAEL, Head of Media Monitoring Unit
Layal BAHNAM, Program Manager
Mia CROCHOT, Research Assistant
Jana CHOUCAIR, Research Assistant

Gender Review: Abir CHEBARO, Gender Expert

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Contents

Introduction..... 2

Key findings (based on four sets* of activities)..... 2

Project overview..... 3

An overview of violence against women in politics.....3

An overview of political and social barriers to gender equality in Lebanon in 2023.....4

Report methodology.....5

Findings.....8

Activity 1.....8

Activity 2.....9

Activity 3..... 10

Activity 4..... 12

Lack of violence in posts..... 17

Conclusions and recommendations..... 18

Introduction

The world is currently witnessing the largest number of women in political decision-making positions to date (26.5 per cent of representation in upper and lower houses, combined), yet gender equality remains far from being achieved, according to the Women in Politics Map for the year 2023, issued by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women.[1]

While progress is being made globally, Lebanon ranks 132 out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index of 2023,[2] dropping 13 positions from 2022. Similarly, it ranks a dismal 144th out of 146 countries in terms of political empowerment according to the same Index. Women in Lebanon are still vastly underrepresented in politics, representing only 6.25 per cent of Members of Parliament after the 2022 elections,[3] 5.4 per cent at the municipal level, and a mere 1.9 per cent of women mayors after the 2016 elections,[4] despite the increasing visibility of women in political and media spheres.

Violence against women in politics, in all its forms, is one of the main barriers facing women in politics. Indeed, in the context of the parliamentary elections of 2022, coordinated campaigns of violence against women, female journalists and everyone defending them, appeared and intensified on social media, which ended up limiting their political role and participation.[5]

Furthermore, in several studies since 2010, Maharat Foundation has documented a consistent pattern related to the representation of Lebanese women in the media, which is the marginalization of their role and their limited involvement alongside men in shaping public discourse.[6]

As part of the media and gender monitoring of the 2023 municipal elections, Maharat Foundation and Madanyat in partnership with UN Women sought to identify, monitor and analyse the different forms of violence and barriers that may be faced by women running for political office.

Key findings (based on the four activities)

57.1%
Of women active in the political field in the Shouf, Sidon and Keserwan regions had not heard of any official methods of reporting complaints in the municipal councils.

48%
Of women active in the political field in the regions of Tripoli, Bekaa and Matn have been harassed on social media.

56.8%
Of journalists perceived a difference in media treatment between women and men.

53%
Of women municipal council members reported experiencing violence within their respective municipalities.

6%
Only of women municipal council members had a social media presence, which contributed to a reduced incidence of violent comments directed towards them online.

***Note: The four sets of activities included: 1) an opinion survey conducted with women active in the political field in various Lebanese regions, 2) an opinion survey with current women municipality officials, 3) an opinion survey with women and men journalists, and 4) a media monitoring conducted during the months of May and June 2023.**

1- UN Women. (2023). Women in Politics Map 2023. Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023

2- World Economic Forum. (2023). Global Gender Gap Report 2023. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

3- UNDP, Madanyat, & Maharat Foundation. (2022). Breaking the Silence: Violence Against Women in Politics. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/breaking-silence-violence-against-women-politics

4- UNDP (2016). Women in Municipal Elections 2016. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/lebanon/publications/women-municipal-elections-2016

5- UN WOMEN, Madanyat, & Maharat Foundation (2022). Media and Gender monitoring of the 2022 elections: Violence against women in politics. Retrieved from https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2223/marsad-un-women-edited-versiondocx.pdf

6-Maharat Foundation. 2020. Who Makes the News? - Lebanon National Report.

Project overview

This report is part of the media and gender monitoring of the 2023 municipal elections (postponed from 2022, and since postponed again until 2024), which aims to identify, monitor and analyse the different forms of violence and barriers that may be faced by women who are running for political office in the municipal elections – before, during and after the elections. The goal is to influence the discussion about women's political participation and eliminate all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence against them.

Violence against women in politics limits women's political participation and restricts the exercise of their political rights, including their rights as voters, candidates, party supporters, or holders of public positions, jobs or activities. This violence can take various forms, such as biased language and portrayals of women, discriminatory stereotypes, violence and blackmail. Different media play a significant role in transmitting and perpetuating these practices, particularly in the digital age, focusing on women's bodies, sexuality, traditional social roles and stereotypes instead of their competence, abilities and effective contributions to public life.

Election campaigns create a conducive environment for the emergence of this type of violence against women, especially in patriarchal societies where women still suffer from marginalization in political representation and access to media, as well as a lack of acknowledgment of their leadership roles and contributions to public affairs[7]

An overview of violence against women in politics

Gender-based violence centres on targeting the differences between women and men, as well as the societal expectations, roles and stereotypes imposed by society on women and men. The current patriarchal social system uses violence as a reaction to any contrary gender expression that deviates from the prevailing norms and predefined roles, which it perceives as a threat to its existence and the exercise of its actual and intellectual dominance and authority.

Within this context, women who seek to influence and lead in society outside the confines of the roles defined by the prevailing social system – or those who adopt ideas, opinions or lifestyles conflicting with the prevailing values and beliefs in society – face various forms of violence due to their deviation from prescribed norms.

Women active in the political arena still face various forms of violence, whether in person or digitally. Online violence against women is merely an extension of real-world violence against women and ideologies based on gender and patriarchal norms.

Violence against women in politics is not only a violation of women's specific rights but also a threat to human rights in general and to democracy, which is based on participation and the ability to freely express opinions and raise one's voice without suppression or harassment based on gender bias or discrimination. It also works to deter women, marginalize them and exclude them from seeking societal change through political or public work, as well as from assuming leadership positions, whether through candidacy or appointment.

7-UN Women, Madanyat, & Maharat Foundation. 2022. Media and Gender monitoring of the 2022 elections: Violence against women in politics.

In the second half of the year 2023, Lebanon witnessed several legal issues and social incidents that constitute significant barriers to women's active political and social participation on an equal footing with men. On 18 April, the Lebanese Parliament passed a law extending the mandates of municipal councils for one year until 8 May 2024.[8]

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This law, prepared through consensus among the main political parties that dominate the political scene in Lebanon, the same parties that rejected adopting a women's quota law in parliamentary elections, deprived a wide segment of Lebanese society, including women and youth, of the opportunity for active participation in local affairs. While a wide segment of opponents relied on the Constitutional Council to invalidate the law extending the mandates of municipalities, the Council's decision on 30 May 2023 was met with disappointment as appeals were rejected.

Moreover, notable incidents such as the harassment of a woman wearing a bathing suit at Sidon Beach on 21 May 2023,[9] underscore the enduring influence of the patriarchal mindset, which takes various forms in the name of religion, social customs and traditions, thereby constituting an additional barrier to gender equality.

8- L'Orient Today. (2023, April 18). Parliament extends municipalities' mandates for max one year. Retrieved from https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1335000/parliament-extends-municipalities-mandates-for-max-one-year.html

9-Jamal, Urooba. 2023. "Lebanese feminists protest after woman harassed over swimsuit," Al Jazeera. Accessed 25 September 2023. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/22/lebanon-swimwear-protest

Report methodology

The methodology is based on collecting and analysing a set of data and findings through a series of key activities carried out by Madanyat and Maharat Foundation within the framework of the project, serving the objectives of this report as follows:

Activity 1: An opinion survey and listening group discussions were conducted with women active in the political field in various regions to monitor and explore the perceptions of women political leaders and change-makers in response to women's participation and violence against women in politics in the 2023 municipal elections.

A diverse geographic sample of **73 women active in the political field was identified for six listening group discussions (figure 1)**, each lasting two hours, in the following districts and governorates: Keserwan, Sidon, Tripoli, Bekaa, Matn and Chouf.

Participants also filled out a questionnaire aimed at understanding the perspectives of women political leaders and change-makers regarding the topic of women's participation and violence against them in the political sphere. Specific recommendations were issued for each listening group discussion.

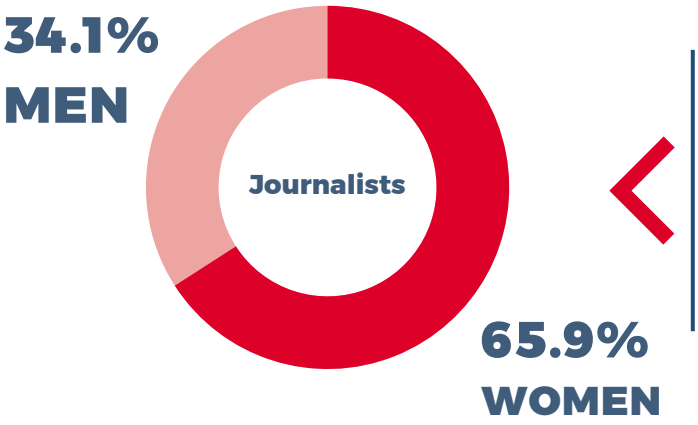
The current report seeks to identify the commonalities of the listening group discussions in the regions and summarize them.

Figure 1. Locations of listening group discussions related to Activity 1

Activity 2: A listening group discussion and an opinion survey were conducted with current members of municipal councils to assess violence against women who have reached decision-making positions in municipalities.

A questionnaire was developed to gather information from a sample of **36 current women members in municipal councils** (and one female municipal council president) to assess the working environment in these councils concerning women's presence and participation and the extent of their exposure to any form of violence or harassment that may discourage them from engaging in local political activities. The survey aimed to collect specific information from the targeted sample regarding gender discrimination during the electoral process, their exercise of duties, the types of violence against them, the available opportunities to report it and measures to mitigate it.

Figure 2. Gender distribution of the surveyed journalists



36 **Current women members in municipal councils**

Activity 3: A roundtable discussion and a journalists' survey on the adherence of media coverage in Lebanon to gender-sensitive reporting standards and combating violence against women through media work.

A total of 44 journalists **(65.9 per cent female and 34.1 per cent male)** working in various Lebanese media institutions, including independent journalists, responded to a survey consisting of 13 questions (figure 2). The study aimed to assess Lebanese journalists' understanding of gender-based violence directed against activists in the public sphere, as well as the extent to which media coverage in Lebanon adheres to gender-sensitive reporting standards. Additionally, a roundtable attended by 18 journalists was held to present the survey results and draft recommendations regarding media coverage of violence against women in politics and the need for greater consideration of gender balance in media work.

Activity 4: Monitoring and analysing the activity of a sample of women[10] municipal members through their social media accounts, tracking their positions and violence directed at them.

Through the mapping of a total of 663 women members of municipal councils (elected in the 2016 elections), it was found that only 41 women members had **social media accounts (6 per cent). Of these accounts, 13.2 per cent were on Twitter and 86.6 per cent were on Facebook.**

The activity of the specified sample of 41 women municipal members using social media was monitored according to the following criteria:

1. The type of posts on their accounts, using four categories:	2. The timing around which the posts were published, categorized as follows:
- Expressing a stance - Proposing solutions and alternatives - Personal posts - Activities	- Meetings and gatherings - Public activities - Social events - Current events

10-UNDP. 2016. Women in Municipal Elections 2016.

Activity 1:

The listening group discussions involved women active in the political field, including members of municipal councils, civil society representatives, public service employees, and aspiring municipal election candidates who shared their experiences and knowledge. Some participants expressed their interest in running for the upcoming municipal elections and emphasized the importance of increased support for their electoral campaigns.

Women from all regions shared similar challenges, saying that they continue to face policies of marginalization, mockery and neglect despite proving their competence over the years. Indeed, the prevailing culture of mockery in male-dominated societies reinforces stereotypical images of women.

Confining women to limited stereotypical expectations reflects a lack of respect for women's capabilities and hinders their access to decision-making positions. This type of violence reinforces gender stereotypes and limits women's roles in society, hindering their progress and the realization of their full potential. Thus, it is essential to raise awareness, change these stereotypical images of women and promote equality in opportunities by activating women's participation in all fields.

The majority of participants from various regions in Lebanon – including Matn, Bekaa, Tripoli, Sidon, Keserwan and Chouf – reported experiencing psychological violence.

This type of violence causes moral damage and psychological harm to the victim and frightens her through blackmail and verbal attacks, personal defamation and the dissemination of misleading information with the aim of distorting perceptions, harming reputations and undermining the dignity and social status of women. However, the prevalence of psychological violence varied by region, as **80 per cent of women participants from Matn reported experiencing psychological violence, while in the Bekaa region, the percentage was 76.5 per cent. In Sidon, the percentage was 63.5 per cent, similar to the rate in Chouf, whereas in the Keserwan region it was only 42.9 per cent.**

Furthermore, women said they continue to face societal and religious barriers that hinder their participation in public life. It is worth noting that the cultural characteristics of some regions have a particular impact on the behavior and attitudes towards women in politics. An illustrative example of this is the prevailing clan mentality, which initially opposes women's municipal work. This opposition can sometimes escalate into various forms of violence, including threats. However, this resistance eventually turns into support once women's success and achievements are acknowledged. Similarly, in other regions, women continue to face obstacles stemming from religious interpretations opposing women's participation in the public sphere, deterring them from engaging in decision-making processes.

Activity 2

The survey revealed that about 66.7 per cent of current women council members noticed differences in treatment between men and women candidates, especially by voters **(36.4 per cent) and municipal council members (18.2 per cent).**

Around 52.8 per cent of respondents reported that they were sometimes subjected to various types of violence due to their involvement in local and municipal work, with 41.7 per cent recalling specific incidents they witnessed or were subjected to. Psychological violence (47.4 per cent), social violence (31.6 per cent), and online violence (10.5 per cent) were reported as the most common types of violence.

However, **44 per cent of respondents who reported cases of gender-based violence received no protective measures, emphasizing the inadequate response to such incidents.** Half of the respondents (50 per cent) said they reported incidents to the municipality's president, while 16.7 per cent filed complaints with the police or public prosecutor.

At the same time, only 25 per cent of respondents expressed confidence in measures to prevent and punish violence in the municipality and felt adequately safe to use these measures.

Despite 91.7 per cent of the respondents using social media, 69.4 per cent of them denied being subjected to any attacks on these platforms. Some who faced online violence either said they reported it or chose to disable comments.

Half of the respondents asserted that there is not enough awareness about violence against women in politics within municipalities and public institutions. There was a call for more awareness on the subject and for a change in societal culture to challenge traditional gender patterns related to women's work.

Furthermore, listening group participants stated that the postponement of elections has had a negative impact on women's chances of winning in Lebanon and on their motivation.

These findings underscore the urgent need for awareness campaigns within local communities in order to reinforce inclusive decision-making and address topics such as violence against women in politics and gender stereotypes that hinder women's participation. The survey's results also demonstrate the vital importance of increasing awareness about available reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence within municipalities, ensuring that women feel safe and supported when filing complaints. Developing an internal policy within municipalities to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation or harassment also appears as a necessity in light of the aforementioned findings, with the aim of creating a safe and inclusive environment where strict actions are taken against any member who engages in misconduct or violates the rights of others.

Activity 3:

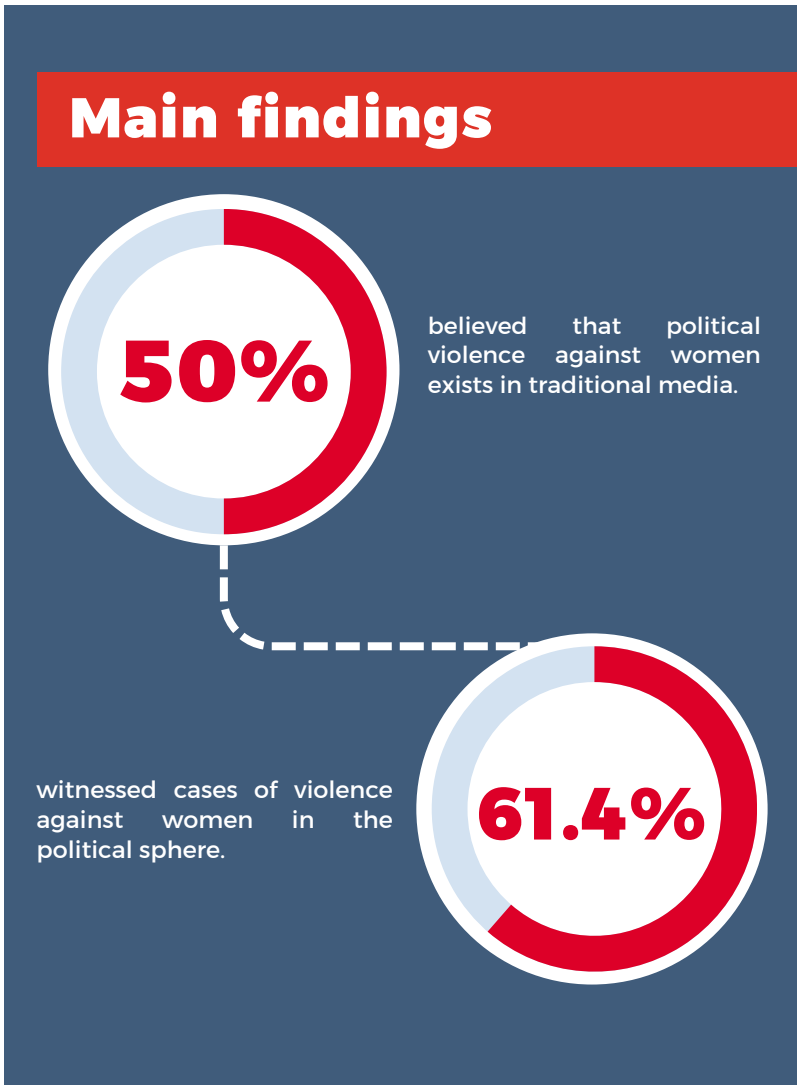
According to the journalists' survey results, **50 per cent of all surveyed journalists (men and women) believed that political violence against women exists in traditional media**, with the same percentage reported for social media platforms. On the other hand, **61.4 per cent of men and women journalists witnessed cases of violence against women in the political sphere (figure 3)**, including digital and psychological violence.

Moreover, surveyed journalists highlighted the fact that the media coverage of election campaigns is mostly focused on men. They also noted disparity in the representation of women activists or experts in specific fields compared to their male counterparts, highlighting that the types of questions directed at women tend to emphasize their stereotypical roles rather than their contributions as leaders in society.

Additionally, **88.6 per cent of journalists acknowledged the role of journalists in combating violence against women in politics through their journalism**. Furthermore, **90.9 per cent of respondents expressed their commitment to allocating equal spaces for both men and women experts in media coverage (figure 4).**

Nevertheless, the roundtable discussion highlighted the frequent occurrence of violence against women journalists due to their media coverage or articles involving specific political forces. Women journalists often face verbal abuse and threats to remove what they have written.

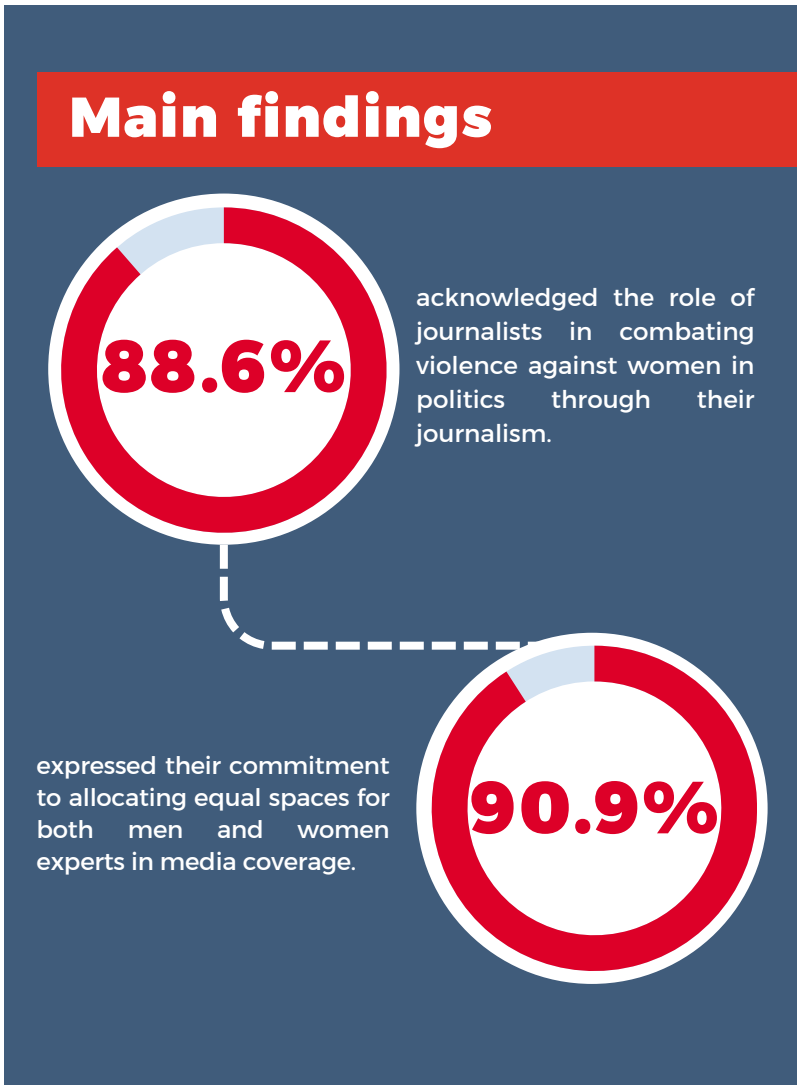
Figure 3. Main findings from activity 3



Regarding women's participation in the media, participants in the roundtable discussion highlighted the lack of institutional policies within their respective media organizations to support women's media visibility. The absence of gender-sensitive reporting guidelines within their media organizations was also noted.

Journalists' answers depict the reality of women's representation in Lebanese media and align with the findings of other studies conducted previously by Maharat Foundation on this matter as women still suffer from underrepresentation and gender stereotyping in the media, highlighting the failure of the Lebanese media to acknowledge women's capacity in decision-making. Nonetheless, journalists' acknowledgment of the existence of violence against women in the political field, their recognition of the role of journalists in combating violence against women in politics through their journalistic work, as well as their commitment to allocating equal spaces for both men and women experts in media coverage can be regarded as a positive indicator toward change.

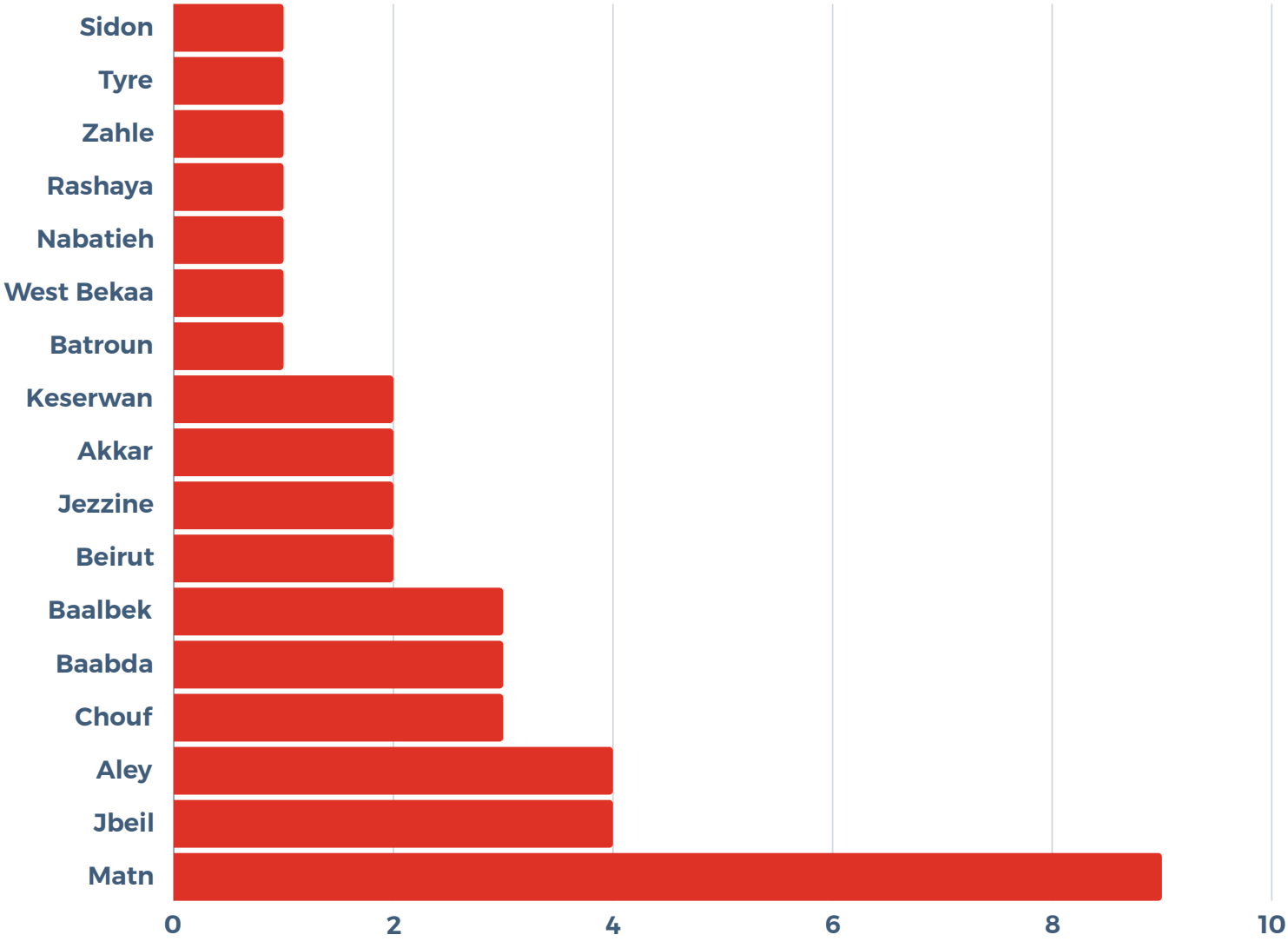
Figure 4. Main Findings from activity 3



Activity 4:

The distribution of women with social media accounts by district is shown in Figure 5.

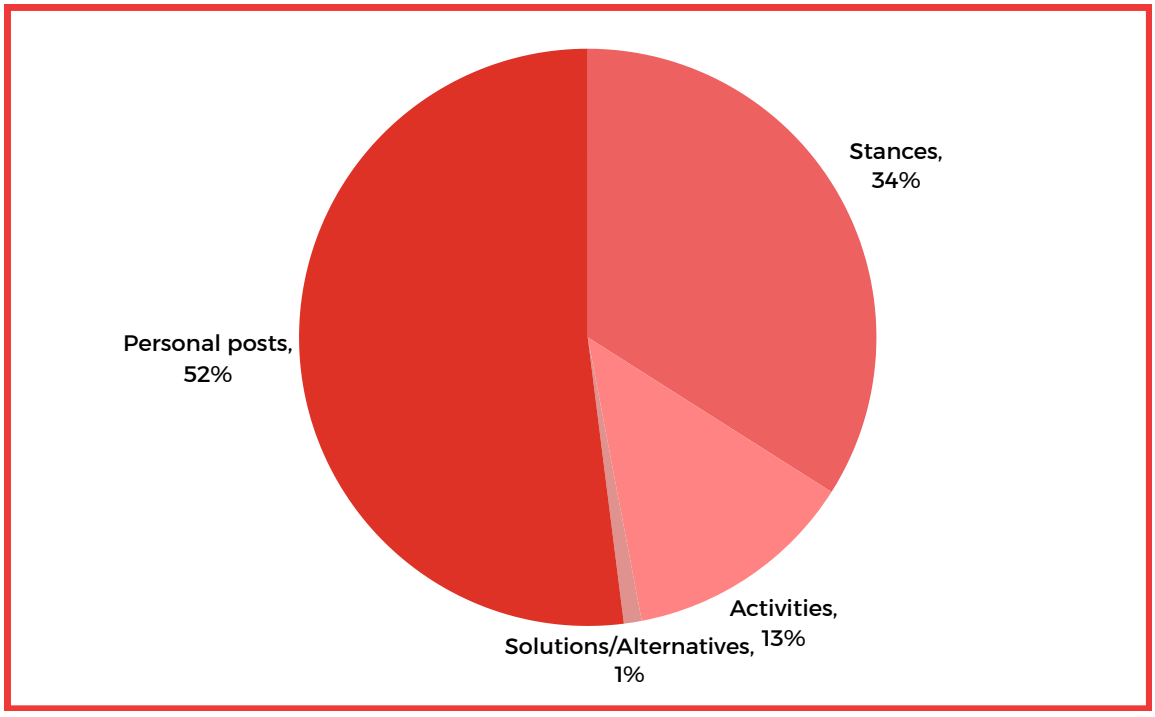
Figure 5. Distribution of the monitored sample of social media accounts of women municipal council members, by district



Type of posts

Analysis of the type of posts and tweets reveals that approximately half of the monitored content was personal posts (52 per cent). The remaining posts were related to: stances taken on various occasions (34 per cent); miscellaneous activities (13 per cent); and proposals for solutions and alternatives to ongoing or urgent issues (1 per cent).

Figure 6. Distribution of the observed type of posts by women municipal members on social media

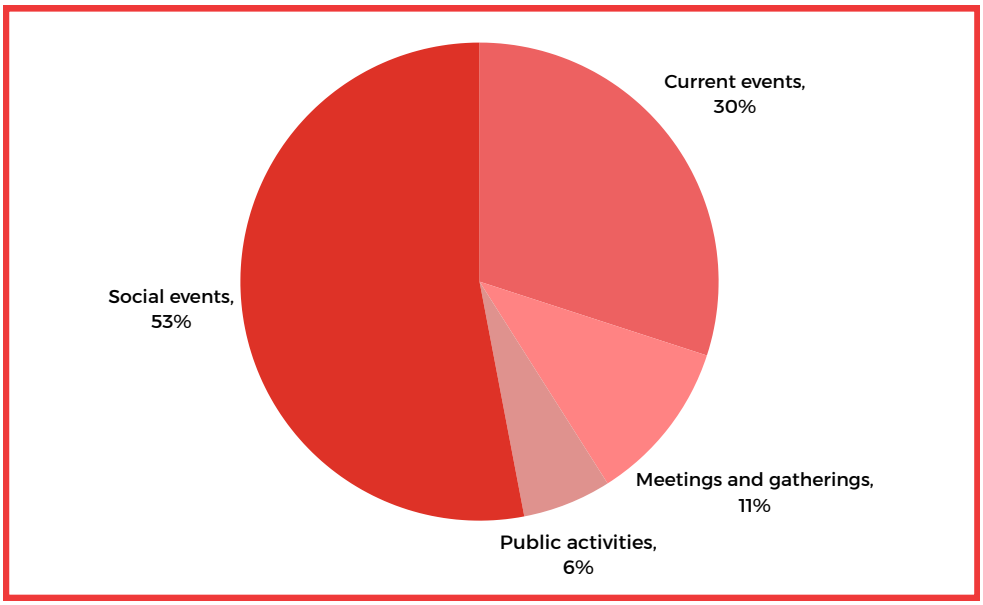


Note: The sample includes 403 posts and tweets monitored during the months of May and June.

Timing of posts

When it comes to the timing for these social media posts, 53 per cent were related to social events, while the others were associated with: current events (30 per cent); meetings and gatherings (11 per cent); and public activities (6 per cent).

Figure 7. Observed timing for the social media posts of active female municipal council members



Note: The sample includes 403 posts and tweets monitored during the months of May and June.

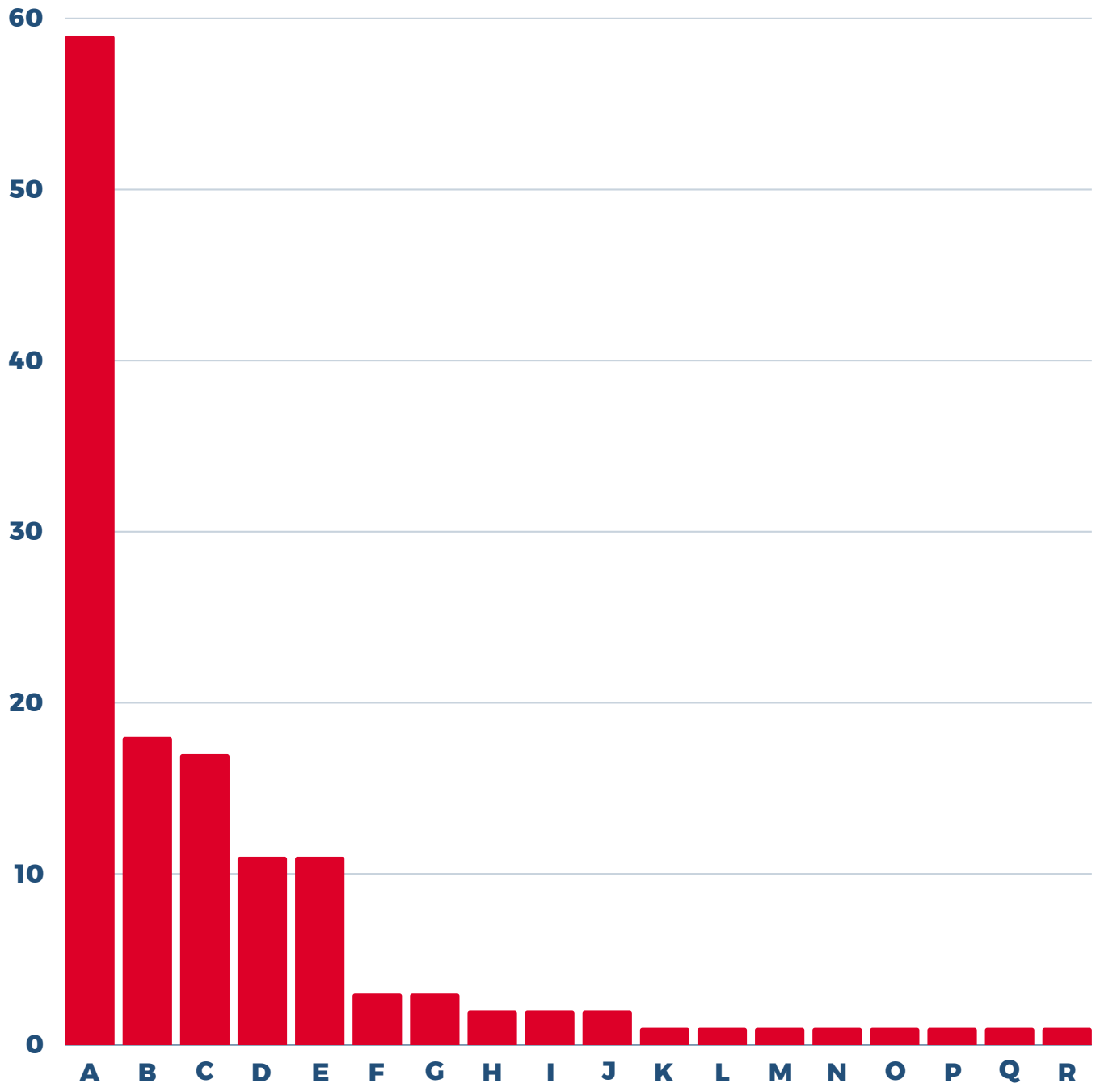
The monitoring revealed that 18 of the 41 accounts shared one or more stances related to current events or public activities, totalling 136 out of 403 observed posts (34 per cent).

Examples of stances they shared include frustrations surrounding the extension of the municipal elections, such as:

> **"Seven years are enough!!! There must be municipal elections."**
>
> **"And the Rule of Law took its last breath" #Constitutional_Council #Municipal_Elections"**

The number of stances taken varied among the monitored accounts of women members of municipal councils, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Social media posts expressing a stance, by women municipal council members



Note: Each sign refers to one of the 18 women members of municipality who shared one or more opinions or stances related to current events or public activities.

Examples of stances[11] expressed by women members of municipal councils on various issues:

Human rights issues:

"Lebanon's abstention from voting on the United Nations resolution to establish an independent body for forcibly disappeared individuals in Syria is a mark of betrayal from officials who are irresponsible."(posted on the 30th of June 2023)

Social issues:

"We all are Mayssa.[12] (...) Meet us on Sidon beach to raise our voice through a press conference condemning the violence and humiliation experienced by Mayssa and every woman in public places." (posted on the 19th of May 2023)

Health care issues:

"Is the phenomenon of counterfeit drugs normal? What's next, Lebanon?"(posted on the 5th of June 2023)

Education issues:

"On what basis are official exams evaluated? What are the criteria? At the expense of public school students? Yes, in favour of cancelling the official exams for the year 2023." (posted on the 5th of June 2023)

Economic issues:

"We are all trapped in a place where citizens are either immigrating or trying to find personal ways to survive as individuals but not as a society or are either left behind as beggars". (posted on the 5th of June 2023)

Accountability and transparency issues:

"Riad Salameh is just the beginning, and the list is long." (posted on the 20th of May 2023)
"A sample of the Lebanese judiciary ... undermining our intelligence and belittling the Lebanese people." (posted on the 20th of May 2023)

11-All the following social media posts related to women municipal council members were accessed on the 1st of October 2023.
12-Mayssa Hanouni Yaafouri was harassed at Sidon Beach on 21 May 2023 for wearing a bathing suit.

Lack of violence in posts

According to the media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation and Madanyat in the lead-up to Lebanon's municipal elections, the social media accounts of current female municipality members were exempt from violent comments, despite these women expressing stances related to political, social, economic and human rights issues. This could be explained by the fact that the female municipal council members took an oppositional and critical stance on multiple issues, without singling out specific individuals or political parties. Additionally, the fact that women members of municipal councils were more engaged in local battles, distinct from the broader dynamics of national politics, is another important factor that could explain the absence of violent comments. Conversely, the monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation and Madanyat during the parliamentary elections of 2022 showed that the political positioning and affiliation of women candidates as well as their political agenda at the national level significantly influenced the extent of violence they encountered during the pre-election phase.[13]

Another contributing factor to the absence of violent comments is the limited presence of women members within municipality councils that were active on social media platforms, accounting for only **6 per cent of the total number of women members on municipal councils (figure 10).** Furthermore, the relatively low visibility of women active at the local level also plays a role in this regard.[14]

6%

of the total number of women members on municipal councils were active on social media platforms.

13- UN Women, Madanyat, & Maharat Foundation. 2022. Media and Gender monitoring of the 2022 elections: Violence against women in politics.

14- Global Partners Governance. 2022. Women's Political Participation in Lebanon's Local Government

The activities conducted in the framework of this project demonstrate that women active in the political field, including on municipal councils, are subjected to various forms of violence, including psychological violence, digital violence and social violence. Furthermore, societal norms and religious interpretations constitute significant barriers faced by women running for political office that contribute to exacerbating violence against them. Additionally, according to journalists who participated in the roundtable discussion, women active in the political field remain underrepresented in the media, which still plays a significant role in perpetuating gender stereotypes, in the absence of gender-sensitive reporting guidelines and adequate policies to support women's visibility within media organizations.

Surprisingly, the violence reportedly faced by women members of municipal councils was not reflected in the findings of the social media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation and Madanyat during the months of May and June 2023. This can be explained by the low percentage of women members of municipal councils present on social media platforms as well as their low visibility in general, compounded with the nature of their discourse, which mainly consisted of stances focused on various issues, without adopting a confrontational approach that directly singles out specific individuals or political parties.

Furthermore, the absence of violent comments on women members of municipal councils' pages/accounts can also be attributed to their focus on local battles and issues without national political dimensions – a factor that can influence the extent of violence they encounter in the pre-election phase, as demonstrated by the monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation and Madanyat during the parliamentary elections of 2022.[15]

In general, improving the situation and combating violence against women in municipal councils requires a targeted set of measures. In light of this, the following actions were recommended:

1. Enhancing awareness and educating the local community: Organizing awareness campaigns for the local community on the issue of violence against women in politics raises awareness about gender biases and promotes an inclusive decision-making approach. This includes open and transparent dialogues and equal participation, which are essential to create an environment where every individual's voice is heard and respected within the team.

15-UN Women, Madanyat, & Maharat Foundation. 2022. Media and Gender monitoring of the 2022 elections: Violence against women in politics.

2. Developing internal policy and reporting mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation or harassment within the municipality: This aims to create a safe and inclusive environment where strict actions are taken against any member who engages in misconduct or violates the rights of others. Each municipality can identify ways to endorse these policies, such as signing on once elected, in order to ensure the commitment of municipal council members to these policies and mechanisms.

3. Implementing training programmes: Capacity-building programmes for municipal council members, especially women, can focus on public speaking, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence and gender sensitivity. These programmes can equip members with the necessary skills to deal with political environments and address instances of violence.

4. Strengthening reporting mechanisms: This can increase awareness about available reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence to ensure a sense of safety and support when filing complaints. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns and clarifying the procedures for reporting and addressing violence within the municipality.

5. Providing opportunities for candidates to increase their media visibility: This can be done through podcasts, social media and other media platforms, allowing women candidates in particular a chance to share their electoral programmes and reach a wider audience.

These measures can contribute to creating a supportive, inclusive and gender-equal environment for all members, promoting a culture that values diversity, respect and equality.

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