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The Road We Build:

How women candidates and male allies are shaping a new politics in Lebanese local government

Authors and research team

Hannah Johnson is Chief Technical Advisor at Global Partners Governance, and has 15 years of experience working in and with parliaments across the UK and internationally. Her expertise spans oversight, law-making, gender-sensitive parliaments, public engagement, research, and evidence-based policy-making. Since 2016, Hannah has worked in Fiji, Laos, Ukraine, Malaysia, Bhutan, The Gambia, and Egypt, among others. Hannah has developed an international reputation for her insights and innovations, and her publications cover issues such as practical ideas for strengthening parliaments, public engagement in parliamentary committees, gender-sensitive oversight and law-making, and gender-sensitive parliaments. Hannah has held leadership roles in the Welsh Parliament, including four years leading the academic engagement programme, and over a decade as a senior parliamentary researcher, specialising in equality, human rights, social security, and poverty. She holds a Master of Laws (LLM) in human rights law.

Moataz Ghaddar is a trainer in leadership, communication and equality, a mentor and researcher specializing in women's political empowerment. He works as a Project Manager at the Global Partners Governance Foundation (GPGF), where he leads initiatives in training, mentoring, and research support for the "Winning with Women" project. He holds a master's degree in finance and has extensive experience working with local and international organizations on gender equality and women's empowerment. Before joining GPGF, he worked as a Tourism Inspector at the Ministry of Tourism, responsible for inspecting touristic institutions and agencies to ensure compliance with required standards and getting licensed by the ministry. He also has valuable experience in education, having worked as an instructor for Accounting and Financial Mathematics courses.

Victoria El-Khoury Zwein is a political activist and women's rights advocate. She has been working as programme consultant and trainer in the MENA region since 1999. Vicky has trained hundreds of other trainers, political candidates, and party leaders in the Middle East and North Africa on internal party organisation and campaigning. In addition to her political skills training, Vicky has conducted policy development, coalition building and advocacy training for a wide range of organisations and municipalities. Victoria is co-founder and executive director of ONDES, a local NGO working on inclusive politics, citizens' engagement, community activism, and local governance. She was elected as a Council Member at Sin El Fil municipality in Lebanon in 2004 and 2016 and she ran for parliamentary elections in 2018 on the Kulluna Watani list.

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How women candidates and male allies are shaping a new politics in Lebanese local government

Summary

- **Lebanon was once a leader in the Arab region on women's political rights.** Today, it has a strong women's movement, public attitudes towards women in politics are overwhelmingly positive, and education levels are equal among women and men.

- But this has not translated into political power at national or local level, and **Lebanon has one of the lowest levels of women's political participation in the world.** Women also lack basic legal rights and large, persistent inequalities remain, especially in employment and leadership.

- **Informal rules and expectations (norms) create barriers for women to participate in politics**, as in other countries. But in Lebanon, social norms are particularly powerful as families, sects, and political parties decide who gets access to political power – all of which are generally led by men.

- **Engaging men as allies and gatekeepers is key to shifting norms about women in politics**, but there is a lack of understanding about what works. Recent international research found that "[d]espite the growing consensus that engaging men matters for gender equality change in politics, much remains unknown about which strategies are most effective", and few programmes focus on the transformation of male attitudes and behaviour.[1]

[1] Brechenmacher, S. and Mann, K. (2024) Aiding Empowerment: Democracy Promotion and Gender Equality in Politics.

- The Winning With Women project therefore **combined capacity building and mentoring** for women candidates with **a network of male allies**. Male allies took part in **a tailored and co-produced curriculum**, covering issues such as gender inequality data, stereotypes and assumptions, unconscious bias, harms of patriarchal norms for women and men, and empathy. Activities included workshops, study visits, networking, mentoring, and peer support.

- **The project found that men's support for women candidates is affected by a complex range of personal, institutional, and societal reasons**. Family support is the key factor, as both an enabler and obstacle. Money, religion, and personal beliefs and values were also important factors in men's decision to support women in politics.

- **Male allies supported women electoral candidates in many ways**. Logistical support was important, but it was individual encouragement and moral support, access to networks, and influence with other men that were most valued by candidates.

- **Allyship had positive outcomes for candidates and allies, at personal, institutional, and societal levels**. The main outcome was attitude changes and increased trust in women's abilities (among allies and the wider community). Participants developed new knowledge, skills, and relationships - including with civil society. Increased confidence and pride, and an appreciation for collaboration between women and men were also reported. Wider outcomes included building momentum for change, especially in political parties. The rare negative outcomes included questions about independence and reliance on male allies.

- **We learned that while this dual approach (involving both women and men) can change attitudes and behaviour**, programmes need **realistic ambitions and broad definitions of success** that recognise the different starting points and challenges facing participants.

- **Building trust with male allies and supporting them to feel ownership of their actions is key**. Programmes should be **highly tailored and flexible to the individual needs and journeys of participants**, rather than working from rigid, fixed curriculums designed in other countries. Being **locally-led (especially by a male project manager)** also helped to build trust.

- **Concrete statistics and facts proved to be more persuasive than abstract theories and ideas**, and men are more likely to support change **when they see for themselves the benefit of women's political participation** to governance and to society.

- Overall, **allyship is best framed as a collaboration between women and men for the benefit of governance and society**, based on trusted relationships, robust evidence, practical information and skills, and real-life experience.

1. Women's political participation in Lebanon: from leader to outlier

Lebanon was once a leader in the Arab region on women's political rights. Today, it has a strong women's movement, public attitudes towards women in politics are overwhelmingly positive, and education levels are equal for women and men.

But this has not translated into political power at national or local level, and Lebanon has one of the lowest levels of women's political participation in the world. Women also lack basic legal rights, and persistent inequalities remain, particularly in employment and leadership.

Informal rules and expectations (norms) create barriers for women to participate in politics, as in other countries. But in Lebanon, social norms are particularly powerful as families, sects, and political parties decide who gets access to political power.

Engaging men as allies and gatekeepers is key to shifting norms about women in politics, but there is a lack of understanding about what works.

Lebanon's women's rights journey

Lebanon was the first Arab nation-state to grant women the right to vote and stand for election in 1953.[2] Myrna Boustani became the first woman to be elected to Parliament a decade later.

The civil war (1975-1990) reversed some of the gains made, with many women confined to domestic work to manage the fallout. The post-war period was marked by political instability, corruption, and sectarianism, leading to an increase in civil society activity, including women's movements.[3]

Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, albeit with reservations to several articles.[4]

Efforts to secure women's legal rights and repeal discriminatory provisions have been slow. Basic rights on divorce, inheritance, and child custody are not guaranteed,[5] and child marriage has still not been outlawed due to the lack of political consensus.[6] There are also large and persistent inequalities in employment and leadership.[7]

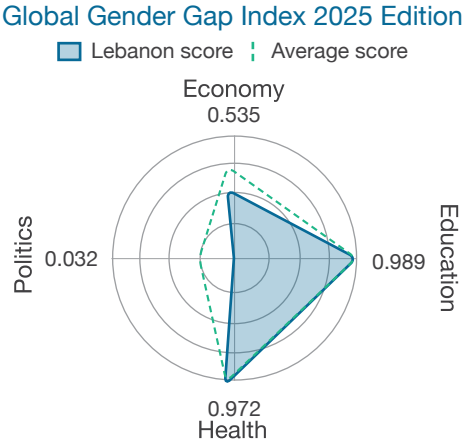
Positive public attitudes, strong civil society, and high equality in education

Lebanon has consistently held the most positive views of gender equality and women in politics in the Arab region.[8] Just 44% of people (and 56% of men) think men are better at political leadership than women - the lowest level in the region.

Three-quarters of people think having women in positions of political power advances women's rights, and there is significant support (76%) for gender quotas in parliament.

Alongside progressive public attitudes, Lebanon still has one of the most active feminist movements in the Arab region, particularly among young women, who "demonstrate their politics in non-traditional, non-structured forms".[9]

The 2019 uprising involved large numbers of women who protested discriminatory laws, patriarchal systems, and



Source: *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*

[2] Schubert, E. (2020). The Struggles for Women's Suffrage in Lebanon. Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 19(1), 202-208.
[3] O'Keefe, R. and Ekmekji, K. (2022) Women at the Table: Insights from Lebanese Women in Politics. Beirut: UN Women and ESCWA
[4] UN Treaty Collection, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, reservations
[5] World Bank, Women, Business and the Law report – Lebanon profile 2024
[6] Girls Not Brides, Lebanon country profile
[7] World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025 – Lebanon economy profile
[8] Arab Barometer (2024) Lebanon country report
[9] O'Keefe, R. and Ekmekji, K. (2022) Women at the Table: Insights from Lebanese Women in Politics. Beirut: UN Women and ESCWA

corruption – joining together women from all sects in a rare collective action. However, a 2021 survey found that few young activists said they would consider running for municipal elections, seeing their activism as the best way to achieve change.[10]

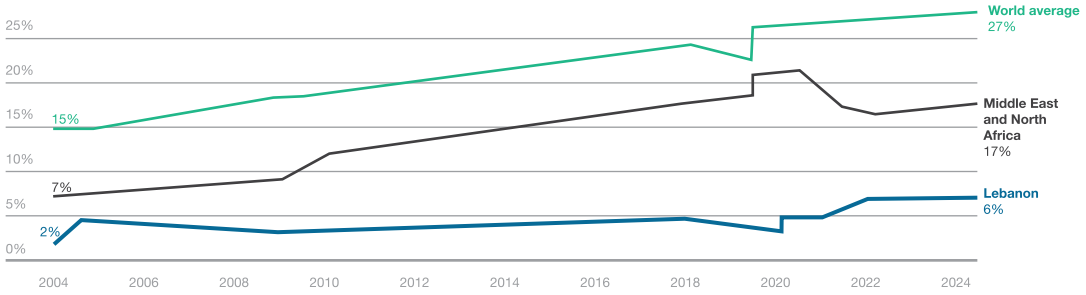
There is also high equality between women and men in education, including: the literacy rate, enrolment in primary and secondary education, and years of schooling.[11] More women are enrolled in tertiary education (57%) than men (43%). [12]

Lack of translation into political power

Despite early progress on women's right to political participation, Lebanon has one of the lowest rates of women's political representation in the world. The Global Gender Gap Index 2025 ranked Lebanon 145th out of 148 countries for political empowerment.[13]

- At national level, only 6% of parliament are women, compared to the global average of 27%, and the regional average of 17%.[14]
- At municipal level, only 10% of council seats were won by women in 2025. While this is a large increase from 5% in 2016, it is still far from the global average of 36%. And only 2% of mukhtar[15] positions were won by women – the same as in 2016.[16]

Percentage of women in national parliaments - world average, MENA region and Lebanon (2004 - 2025)



Source: IPU Parline

Women's political participation improves governance

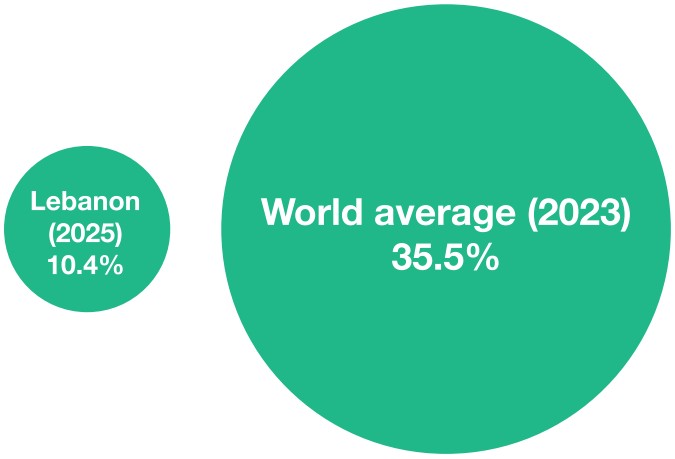
Women's political participation is not just a matter of fairness – it results in better governance.

When women are involved in politics, decision-making is more effective, more widely trusted, and fairer. Studies from around the world show that women's political empowerment is linked to better government performance,[17] economic development,[18] responsiveness to citizen's needs,[19] cooperation across ethnic and party lines,[20] and peace.[21]

[10] UNDP Lebanon (2021) Women in Politics: Delving into Women Empowerment, Perceptions & Attitudes
[11] UNDP, Gendered data from Lebanon
[12] World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025 – Lebanon economy profile
[13] World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2025 – Lebanon economy profile
[14] IPU, Parline data [accessed 16 July 2025]
[15] Mukhtars serve as crucial links between citizens and the state. Their main duties include issuing official certificates, maintaining population records, authenticating personal status events such as births, deaths, and marriages, disseminating laws and regulations, assisting with public safety, reporting crimes or suspicious activities, and facilitating communication between residents and administrative authorities. They also support financial and legal operations – helping with tax collection, legal notifications, and land records – and engage in agricultural, health, and educational matters, such as reporting disease outbreaks and promoting school attendance. The role of mukhtars is even more important in villages where there are no municipalities. While the law does not dictate a formula, it has been the practice to allocate one mukhtar for every 2,500 citizens. Mukhtars, with the members of the mukhtar councils, are elected directly through a popular vote for six-year terms.
[16] Xarxa Europea de Dones Periodistes, Women's Participation in Lebanon's Municipal and Mukhtar Elections: Between Challenges and Aspirations, 24 June 2025
[17] Rios, V., Beltrán-Esteve, M. Gianmoena, L., Peiró-Palomino, J. J Picazo-Tadeo, A. (2023) Quality of government and women's political empowerment: Evidence from European regions, Papers in Regional Science, Volume 102, Issue 6,2023, Pages 1067-1097, https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12761.
[18] Dahlum, S., Henrik Knutsen, C., Mechkova, V. (2022) Women's political empowerment and economic growth, World Development, Volume 156, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105822
[19] Asian Women Parliamentarian Caucus (2023) Substantive representation of women in Asian parliaments
[20] IPU (2008) Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments
[21] Dahlum, S., Wig, T., (2020) Peace Above the Glass Ceiling: The Historical Relationship between Female Political Empowerment and Civil Conflict, International Studies Quarterly, Volume 64, Issue 4, December 2020, Pages 879–893

Lebanon faces huge governance challenges, from conflict to economic crisis. Improving women's access to politics may not seem like a priority in these times, but women can bring new knowledge, experience, and ideas to bear to solve the problems facing the country. Women also tend to use public services more than men, especially at a local level, so have firsthand experience of, and ideas for, improving state support.

Women in local government - Lebanon and world average



Source: UN Women, Women in Local Government

In Lebanon, local government is an important political space, where citizens' frustration with poor governance can be turned into action for change. The smaller voting districts, a lack of sectarian quotas, and relatively limited influence of parties provide more political opportunities for women than at national level.[22]

Social norms exclude women from politics at every level

While women are active and influential through civil society and grassroots organising at the local level, this has not turned into electoral representation. Complex barriers to women's representation persist, including patriarchal norms, family dominance, sectarianism, patronage, and campaigning.

Social norms (i.e. informal, unwritten rules that most people accept and follow), and gender norms (i.e. what is deemed acceptable behaviour for women and men) are persistent barriers to women's political participation. In Lebanon, where families, sects, and political parties decide who has access to political power, social norms are even more powerful.

> "Men prefer men and trust them more than women." – Female candidate
>
> "The negative opinions that are sometimes declared and most of the time un-declared, are that a woman must stay at home, a woman must be a servant to her husband, her children and parents, a woman must be patient and silent, and not defend her rights, and not even demand her rights." – Male ally

Social norms create barriers for women to engage with politics at every level: individual, institutional, and societal.[23] These were all experienced by Winning With Women project participants in the May 2025 municipal elections:

- **Individually,** women are affected by family expectations, lack of access to political networks, resources, and political experience, and are often primarily responsible for most domestic and caregiving responsibilities (which increased further during the recent conflict, as livelihoods and support networks were disrupted). Eleven of the 28 women project participants that ran for election in May dropped out because male relatives or political party members were nominated instead, or they were forbidden to run by their family.

- **Institutionally,** many political parties, governments, and elected bodies are unwelcoming to women in their operations, rules, practices, and informal cultures. They are rarely family-friendly or structured for the reality of women's lives. Municipal council candidates faced pressures to withdraw for male candidates because of political party loyalty, patronage, and financial interests. Women also faced resistance from religious and community leaders who believed women's political participation to be 'haram'.

[22] Küçükkeles, M. & Kaakour, H. (2022) Women's political participation in Lebanon's local government: towards an alternative mode of politics, GPG
[23] NDI (2020) Men, power and politics program guidance

- **Societally,** politics is often viewed as 'men's business', and media focus more on women politicians' appearance or personal lives than policy positions or competence. Violence and abuse, especially online, deters many women from politics. Lebanese women candidates also faced violence and harassment, and attacks on their reputation.

In addition to this, the post-war context and its impact on women's lives and priorities had a major influence on their decisions regarding candidacy among the potential candidates. Many of these women had been displaced with their families. Some of their homes were destroyed, or sustained damage and required urgent repairs. All of them experienced disruptions to their livelihoods and employment, which severely affected their financial stability.

Men's role in improving women's political participation

Men influence every step of a women's political journey: as husbands, family members, community or religious leaders, and gatekeepers in parties, parliaments, and governments. Yet most support programmes don't engage men as allies, mentors, or leaders.

> "You need men to change the mindset of the community." – Female candidate

Instead, they have typically focused on improving the individual capacities of women, without engaging men who control political spaces. This reinforces the idea that women's political under-representation is due to their own shortcomings, rather than the discriminatory and sexist practices, institutions, and cultures that have excluded them.

Training for women candidates and politicians can be effective and welcome, but it cannot stimulate large scale change on its own. Targeting women in isolation also places responsibility for change upon them, rather than sharing it between all parties.

Engaging men to achieve gender equality in politics is a relatively new approach. Recent international research found that "despite the growing consensus that engaging men matters for gender equality change in politics, much remains unknown about which strategies are most effective", and few support programmes focus on the transformation of male attitudes and behaviour.[24]

It also found that most programmes "target women participants in isolation from their families and communities, and neglect the practical challenges they face on the campaign trail."[25]

Previous efforts to work with male allies by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (including with youth civil society members in Lebanon)[26] and IFES[27] were found to trigger changes in attitudes, and allowed women access to spaces and meetings that have traditionally been closed to them.

Winning with Women is a rare example of a 'gender-synchronised' project, working with both women candidates and male allies to support more inclusive political representation. This research contributes to knowledge about the enablers and obstacles, actions, and outcomes experienced by male allies and women political candidates in the Lebanese municipal elections. It goes on to draw conclusions about what can be learnt for future programming and elections, in Lebanon and beyond.

[24] Brechenmacher, S. and Mann, K. (2024) Aiding Empowerment: Democracy Promotion and Gender Equality in Politics.
[25] Brechenmacher, S. and Mann, K. (2024) Aiding Empowerment: Democracy Promotion and Gender Equality in Politics.
[26] NDI (2020) Men, power and politics program guidance
[27] IFES (2016) Male Allies for Leadership Equality: Learning from Nigeria's Experience

2. The Winning With Women project

The Winning With Women project aims to strengthen women's political leadership at the local level in Lebanon. This cannot be achieved without engaging men, who act as gatekeepers within political parties, communities, and families, so the project created a network of male allies for women electoral candidates at the municipal level.

The tailored and co-produced curriculum was designed to take participants along a journey of allyship, using data, questioning stereotypes and assumptions, exploring unconscious bias, discussing harms of patriarchal norms for women and men, and building empathy. The project also adapted to the unstable political and security situation, which made this work even more challenging.

This research aims to contribute to the evidence base about male allies for women electoral candidates, by synthesising feedback and reflections from the women electoral candidates and male allies in the project.

Since 2019 the Winning With Women project has been working to strengthen women's leadership and political participation at the local level in Lebanon. It is led by Global Partners Governance Foundation (GPGF) in partnership with the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST), and funded by Porticus.

The project unites aspiring women candidates and supportive male allies to promote women's political participation and leadership across six governorates: Baalbek-Hermel, Bekaa, North Lebanon, Beirut, South Lebanon and Mount Lebanon, encompassing almost the entire country. It brings together people from various backgrounds, who transcended sectarian, political, and familial affiliations that often divide communities, for a common goal: improving women's political leadership at the community and municipal levels.

The project is tailored to meet demand (determined through in-depth research), and applies evidence-based strategies in its activities. It combines workshops, study visits, networking that cultivates peer support, and tailored mentoring to address both structural and behavioural barriers to women's political leadership and male allyship.

The project uses a blend of both local and international expertise, drawing on experts from the highest echelons of Lebanese and international political leadership to provide comprehensive support and guidance.

Introduction of the male allies component

Many initiatives exist to improve women's political participation in Lebanon and elsewhere. But most of these focus on providing women with capacity-building trainings such as leadership, public speaking, and campaigning. This raised a question for the project: is the challenge really that women lack skills or need more training?

While most people, regardless of gender, can benefit from new learning, this was not the answer to the structural barriers women face when engaging in political work.

The political landscape in Lebanon is largely controlled by men. This means that women cannot be fully empowered without men's active engagement. Recognising the pivotal role men play in reshaping power dynamics and political decision-making, it became imperative to forge alliances with them and challenge patriarchal and masculine norms.

To do this, we worked with aspiring women candidates and, through mentoring, supported them in mapping and choosing their male allies. This process resulted in the formation of a network of 24 male allies. Some joined initially to support a specific candidate, while others engaged from a genuine belief in this work. Over the past years, we have supported their transition along the allyship spectrum - from apathy, to becoming active allies and advocates, supporting women's political participation in principle and not just in relation to one candidate.

Source: https://ioh.org.uk/2021/10/the-role-of-occupational-health-leadership-in-promoting-equality-diversity-reflections-of-an-occupational-physician/

Allyship as a journey

As with the women candidates, the male allies did not all start from the same position. Some came to support a specific family member, friend, or colleague. Others came with more progressive political and personal beliefs about the importance of women in leadership. Others were more cautious and suspicious of the project and its intentions.

The curriculum was designed and adapted to take allies on a journey along the ally continuum, from apathy to awareness, on to activism and then advocacy. Workshops encouraged open discussions and group work, including:

- **Using data to describe the problem of women's political participation**: learning started from 'zero' to encourage recognition of the problem. Statistics and global rankings, including from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, were particularly powerful. These facts helped to undo the assumptions that Lebanon is progressive in this area. Alongside this, the study visits exposed them to real life examples where women have proven to be effective leaders in the political and public sphere at the municipal level.

- **Challenging the assumption that women are not as competent as men**: facts and figures about women's education increased the understanding that women's exclusion from the political sphere is not because of competence, but because of social and gender norms in society.

- **Questioning stereotypes and privileges**: workshops addressed gender stereotypes, how they are constructed through education, culture, and media, and how they affect behaviour. Discussions also dealt with the 'unearned privileges' of being a man.

- **Exploring unconscious bias and how it affects behaviour**: using Daniel Kahneman's 'Thinking Fast and Slow' to describe how systems that encourage fast thinking reinforce stereotypes, because it is automatic and based on learned associations. This can play out in voter judgements (e.g. 'men make better leaders'), party selection processes (e.g. 'she doesn't look like a leader'), and media coverage (e.g. emphasis on appearance or family life of women candidates).

- **Describing how gender norms harm both women and men**: the 'man box' activity[28] was particularly effective; it demonstrated how people are pressured to act in a certain way because of social and gender norms, with negative effects for both women and men.

- **Building empathy**: the discussion about violence against women in politics, and particularly the testimony shared by a previous electoral candidate, helped build compassion and understanding.

[28] NextGenMan, Deconstructing the Man Box

The curriculum was also designed to be:

- **Tailored to participants' needs**: The curriculum was based on the principle that participants were more likely to "walk the road if they had built it themselves". The project was designed to present evidence, show examples and allow allies to come to conclusions and decide actions for themselves.

  For example, in the first workshop, allies were asked how they were planning to support the women candidates. After participating in the workshops and study visits, they were asked the question again. Rather than presenting them with a list of actions they must take, they were encouraged to use their new knowledge, skills, and experiences, and apply them to the needs and situation of the candidate. This also resulted in a pledge that everyone signed to solidify their commitment to action.

  Some parts of the curriculum were also co-designed with participants. Focus groups were held to decide what additional skills, knowledge, or activities were needed at that point in the journey of allies and candidates.

- **Experiential**: The study visits aimed to expose both the women participants and their male allies to municipalities where women's leadership had proven effective. The visits were led by those women leaders themselves, further highlighting their role and impact.

  This included visiting a municipality where the Woman vice president has been very successful and initiated new projects, which led to the village winning the Arab Tourism Capital 2024 title.

- **Locally-led, by a man**: The Winning With Women project manager is a Lebanese man, and most of the expert associates are Lebanese former candidates and politicians.

The effectiveness of the curriculum's design is explored in more detail in sections 5 and 6.

Political and security context

The previous municipal elections in Lebanon were held in 2016, with the next round scheduled for 2022. However, due to the country's severe political and economic crisis, compounded by regional instability and the paralysis of state institutions, the elections were delayed three times. The first postponement was made under the pretext of prioritising parliamentary elections, the second was attributed to alleged funding constraints, and the third was made based on security concerns.

> "The reason for [the candidate] not running in the end, are the most recent border issues (clashes with the Syrian side). Because the village is on the border, if she wanted to go there and meet with the people… the road to the village became a truck road, with big trucks, and small cars, it was hard to drive. So, these things Increased the necessity, of not her not running, because we won't be able to go out, and meet people. So the issue, especially the security issue… are combined together." – Male ally

The escalated war with Israel further aggravated instability, diverting national attention and resources away from local governance and contributing to the prolonged postponement. As a result, municipal councils elected in 2018 continued to operate far beyond their original mandate, often struggling to meet the needs of their communities amid growing social and economic pressures.

The repeated delays and uncertainty surrounding the municipal elections had a direct impact on women potential candidates and their decision to run. It wasn't easy to enter the race due to the lack of clarity on when elections would actually be held, making it difficult to plan, secure resources, or mobilise community support.

It also disrupted traditional campaign strategies: candidates could not sustain momentum or visibility over years of postponements, and many faced campaign fatigue before the official electoral process even began.

For women, who already struggle with limited access to funding and political networks, the unpredictability created additional barriers, as they had to balance community responsibilities with the risk of investing time and resources in an election that might not take place.

As a result, the uncertainty weakened participation, narrowed the pool of candidates, and created unequal conditions that favoured established political actors over independent or emerging voices. Despite this, 28 decided to run for elections (out of our network of 47 women), 12 submitted their candidacy, 16 had to withdraw and 7 were elected.

> "I brought the ballot box to my village, I brought the elections because I didn't withdraw. All they wanted was to reach a consensus over nothing." – Female candidate

The elections finally took place in May 2025, but several municipalities did not hold actual voting but instead saw councils formed by consensus. For example, in South Lebanon and Nabatieh, out of 272 municipal councils across the two governorates, 101 were elected unopposed.[29] This practice was also noticed across other governorates. In many cases, powerful local families, sectarian parties, or community leaders reached pre-election agreements to avoid costly and divisive campaigns.

Given the economic crisis and political fatigue after years of delays, in addition to the recent war, consensus was often seen as a way to save resources and maintain social stability in already fragile contexts. While this arrangement ensured councils were filled, it limited opportunities for new or independent candidates, particularly women, to enter municipal politics, reinforcing existing power structures.

But overall the number of women elected at the municipal level doubled (from 5% to 10%). The network of women supported as part of this project all played active roles in the election campaign, even where they did not run for election – as election managers and organisers, and as active supporters of other women (see section 6 for more on this).

Research methodology

This research contributes to understanding about the development of male allies for women electoral candidates, especially given the scarcity of evidence on this issue.

It involved a desk-based literature review, and data collection among the Winning With Women project participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight women candidates and eight male allies, with transcripts amounting to 66,000 words.

A short survey received 60 responses from project participants, and 115 responses from people who did not participate in the project. The research was also informed by a roundtable discussion held in July 2025 with eight male allies.

This report quotes from the interviews and surveys while preserving anonymity.

[29] L'Orient Le Jour, Here are the numbers and competitors for South Lebanon and Nabatieh's municipal elections, 24 May 2025

3. Enablers and obstacles to male allyship

Men's support for women candidates is affected by a complex range of personal, institutional, and societal reasons. In Lebanon, family support is the key factor, as both an enabler and obstacle. Money, religion, and personal beliefs and values were also important factors in men's decision to support women in politics. Both younger and older men were observed to be strong allies.

The engagement of men in gender equality is affected by: individual factors (relationships and networks, knowledge, morals and values, and personal experiences), institutional factors (organisational culture, rules and structures, feminist movements, and international standards), and societal factors (traditional gender roles, political backlash against gender equality, discourse about 'Westernisation', and resistance to change).[30]

Existing international research finds that men in politics are motivated to act for gender equality for different reasons, including personal needs or background, belief in the value of equality and representative democracy, a desire to make full use of the skills and resources in a society, or as a political strategy.[31]

But there are also barriers, including: the reluctance to use a 'feminist' label, fears of criticism from gender advocates about not doing enough or treading on women's toes, peer pressure to maintain the status quo, the desire to maintain power, concerns about the response from religious and other conservative actors, and fears about personal attacks about their masculinity, particularly sexual orientation.[32]

Our research found some similar motivators and obstacles for male allies, but in Lebanon the influence of families, religion, financial interests, and personal beliefs and values were most important.

Individual factors

Family

Lebanon's electoral processes, particularly the local elections, are heavily influenced by family ties, including in the nomination of candidates, creation of electoral lists, and campaigning. This is particularly true in rural areas.

Depending on the area's size and sectarian composition, two or three extended families tend to dominate decision making. Families are often linked by tribal loyalties and sectarian allegiances, which means candidates are chosen based on their background, access to resources, and ability to enhance the family's prestige and forge patron-client relations. Families tend to choose men as their representatives, through a belief that the work requires male leadership.[33]

We found that support from male relatives was often the most important enabler for women candidates to stand for election, but also the biggest obstacle. One candidate said: "those who decide who to nominate are the men in the family, the men in the family meet and decide who will be nominated".

> "Since her husband was nominated for the "mukhtar" election, she chose to reserve support for her husband for the election from the rest of the family or the supporting families, she chose to withdraw her nomination for the benefit of someone else." – Male ally

Women said that "the family. That's the hardest part. … Three meetings were held—Not a single woman was part of our family meeting". Another said "the family won't accept to be represented by a woman … They see a rich man to represent them. The bribery circle. That's what I discovered."

Financial interests were closely tied to nominations. One candidate said "out of five brothers, two were against me, and three were with me. Just because of financial interests. … And when there's money, it dominates. It takes control."

[30] Michalko, J. & Maycock, M. (2024) Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities
[31] OSCE (2025) Sarajevo Tool for Engaging Male Politicians in Achieving Gender Equality in Politics
[32] Michalko, J. & Maycock, M. (2024) Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities
[33] Küçükkeles, M. & Kaakour, H. (2022) Women's political participation in Lebanon's local government: towards an alternative mode of politics, GPG

Several candidates said that male relatives were prioritised for nomination, and some were subject to "direct pressure" to withdraw "for the benefit of another male member of the family". Eleven candidates eventually dropped out to make way for male relatives, out of the 28 who initially decided to run.

While some candidates were strong enough to face down this pressure, as a male ally described, "family peace is much more important than personal peace… That's why the planning [for] her was for the long run [future elections]."

But male family support can also be the most important supportive factor.

One woman said that her father and brothers were her biggest champions – "they never told me to withdraw, they never questioned my decisions".

Other women said their husbands were supportive, with one calling hers a "feminist" supporter of women. Another said her husband had not supported her candidacy nine years ago, but after "hearing all the positive feedback from the village, and realising my value and efficiency, my success, he supported me a lot in these elections".

Candidates also cited support from sons, cousins, and even confidential voting alliances among families as key to their success. Male relatives' reputation in the village was an important factor too: "My dad had a great reputation in the village, so they considered that I will be like him and an honest good person."

> "People tried to tell my husband, why don't you run? And he always replied that I can't be like [her], can't work as she does." – Female candidate

Belief in using the full resources of a society

Men are often motivated to support women candidates because of their capabilities and experience. An ally described his reason for supporting a woman candidate: "I thought she was talented like any other talented man. So, we supported her."

Male allies saw women's participation in politics as strategically beneficial, and excluding them meant operating at half capacity. One said: "Women are energy, energy and strength. And… there are two options for us, either to benefit from it to serve society and the country, or not to benefit from it."
Similarly, one ally considered that women's education would be wasted if she was not able to have a role in politics, asking: "what is stopping her?"

> "If the role is not given to a woman, not only do we lose her power and ability, but we also lose her power and ability to make the work successful." – Male ally

Other men saw that women brought diverse perspectives and ideas to decision-making, saying that "men think differently than women. This difference gives you more options. It offers more solutions—sometimes to things you might not even see".

Some interviewees noted that women are able to communicate with more people in the community (particularly women and younger voters), and had the "ability to reach more places than the male."

Personal values, legal and moral rights and duties

Some male allies were driven by a belief that supporting women was a moral or legal duty, based on fairness and equal rights.

One man considered that it is a woman's "right to establish her presence in society", and another thought they "should take their rights and opportunities like any other man in our society."

Some other male allies had a desire to challenge the status quo and contribute to social change. One said they wanted to "break the taboo that prevents women from working in public affairs, and to set an example".

> "I am an activist in public work. I consider that it means a lot to me especially for women, to have a more active role in their society, especially in terms of participating in political work." – Male ally

Criticism, suspicion, and reprisals

The primary obstacle to male allyship was negative reactions from others. Many allies interviewed said that they experienced mockery, suspicion, or were even punished professionally. One male ally said during the round table that "men are shy about going publicly with supporting women because the patriarchal mentality traps men just as it traps women."

People questioned why a man would not support another man. Others mocked the idea, saying the ally was "a woman's assistant, I am supposed to be the boss". Another said he lost a job because of his allyship, saying his ideas were "distorted".

> "[People say] "Look at this guy, he is coming to support a woman instead of supporting his fellow men" And they will conclude that his interest and attention to support a woman is for particular reasons." – Male ally

One man was "called gay for supporting a woman, which is culturally unacceptable in my village." Other allies were accused of "chasing after women", "womanizer", and that they were supporting a woman "because she's beautiful...not about her qualifications."
Women candidates were also subject to suspicions relating to male supporters. One woman said that a Sheikh asked to have a photo with her, but she had to "think and be pro-active – what might people think of me", and asked someone to join them in the middle.

Age

Some candidates observed that older men were unexpectedly supportive, and young people showed enthusiasm for change. One noted that she was "positively surprised" by support from an older man, and noted that they "came from families where women and girls were strong and successful", which aligns with previous research.[34]

Another woman candidate said that "the youth...supported me because of my new approach", and "youth were voting for me, distributing my flyers".

Institutional factors

Political parties

Particularly in urban areas, political parties hold a lot of influence over electoral processes. Some parties exclude women, or place them in token roles. One male ally interviewed said that the women in politics "are just an accessory to the list of candidates…. there [is] no fairness in selection among the political parties lists of candidates."

Other parties actively discouraged women or replaced them with more loyal men, so while "[parties] believe in women's role, they don't believe in women as a candidate".

> "The pressure was from a political party to reject me and chose a man more affiliated to them." – Female candidate

One candidate said that she was challenged from within her party, with another member accusing her of joining the rival list and "discrediting" her with the party leadership. Another candidate was eliminated from a list because she was divorced, and it was assumed she could "cause trouble". She observed "this wouldn't happen to a man with the same situation".

In April 2025, a new directive allowed married women to run for office either in their hometown or their husband's town.[35] This provided more flexibility in candidacy, but still does not allow all candidates to run in their place of residence, which would arguably reduce familial and tribal influence over electoral outcomes,[36] but may increase the influence of political parties.

This new measure, while very important, didn't remove the burden of family representation. A woman candidate reported that her own family didn't consider that she could represent them nor her husband's family. This challenge was further compounded by sectarian dynamics.

In another case, a candidate highlighted that belonging to a different sect than her husband created obstacles to her candidacy for the vice-presidency, as the electoral list was unable to reach consensus on

[34] Asian Women Parliamentarian Caucus (2023) Substantive representation of women in Asian parliaments
[35] L'Orient Today, Municipal elections in Lebanon: Married women will be allowed to run in their hometowns, 6 April 2025
[36] Xarxa Europea de Dones Periodistes, Women's Participation in Lebanon's Municipal and Mukhtar Elections: Between Challenges and Aspirations, 24 June 2025

which sect she should represent. This illustrates how traditional sectarian power-sharing arrangements, where leadership positions such as president and vice-president are customarily allocated to specific sects, continue to restrict women's advanced political participation. Looking like they are not sufficiently defending the family and sectarian representation create an additional challenge on the male allies to publicly support women.

Funding and patronage

As in many countries, campaign costs are a major barrier to election for women. Male candidates were more likely to have money or be supported by wealth patrons. One woman said "money plays the biggest role. Either you have money, or someone is funding you. Or they're greasing hands... Because someone was financially comfortable, so they put him up."

Several candidates said the biggest challenge was money for campaigning – including for branding, posters, and hospitality. An ally said (of men): "he's the one who owns the wealth, or he owns the money. She doesn't have the capacity to run for elections and take an election campaign".

One woman said that if she had known how much support she would get, she would have started her own list, "but the biggest challenge was funding". Her male ally responded that "we could've solved that. We would've found funds from here and there."

Candidates described pressure to withdraw in exchange for money or favours: "'they said: 'withdraw, and whatever you want, you'll get—either in cash or position'".

Political deals sidelined women in favour of more 'useful' or connected men. One candidate said on election day, she was receiving more support until "money began flowing. They started making deals here and there and by two o'clock in the afternoon, the whole situation flipped."

> "[People] may have to hide their support for a competent woman in order to support a man or a woman who are not competent to secure a certain interest or not to have a problem in a certain place." - Male ally

Societal factors

Religion

Religious leaders and conservative norms posed obstacles to women's success and male allyship, with some clerics declaring women's political participation to be 'haram'. A male ally said that "the religious society that we live in does not allow a woman to be on the list, to run as a candidate."

> "A religious body … says that it is haram [forbidden]. And any woman who comes to the municipality, we consider her as an outcast, or an outsider from religion, traditions, and morals." - Male ally

One woman candidate said that her opposers tried to tell voters that she didn't "respect older people and they meant specifically religious men - they consider that I don't obey."

Allies observed the power of these norms: "I know a lot of women who wanted to be nominated, but they stopped at the last moment because of social, religious, security and political reasons."

Violence and harassment

Some women candidates interviewed experiences threats, social exclusion, and even physical intimidation. One was verbally threatened, and some of her women supporters "got the divorce threat if they voted for [her]." Male allies also saw this: "verbal harassment, she was harassed verbally… other than the verbal harassment, there are people who will not talk to you".

> "On election day, I was in front of a polling station. I was distributing our brochure. A guy on a motorcycle, who was in black, was violent with me questioning me which list I am supporting. I got scared but immediately, my colleagues were supporting me, they were my voice. They spoke to him and to his list, holding them accountable for this incident." – Female candidate

4. Actions taken by male allies

Male allies supported women electoral candidates in many ways. Logistical support was important, but it was individual encouragement and moral support, access to networks, and influence with other men that were most valued by candidates.

Like all electoral candidates, women come from different starting points, have different levels of knowledge and skills, and face different challenges. Some may need moral support to overcome resistance in her own family, while others may want to improve their online campaigning skills.

Male allies in the project worked with candidates to understand their needs, and what support they can usefully provide in each situation. But they also had different backgrounds and levels of knowledge.

The allies took a wide range of actions, which can loosely be categorised as: individual (building skills, knowledge, confidence), relational (building networks and trust, especially with other men), and logistical (campaigning, organising, and funding).

Individual capacity and confidence building

Encouragement and moral support

Emotional support was highly valued by candidates; encouragement helped them stay motivated, especially during moments of self-doubt or social pressure: "The most important support I received was this emotional backing."

> "She was considering to withdraw and not run anymore, so I purposely went to visit her ... And I told her that she should keep going… With my support, along with a group of people who visited her with me, she really felt more at ease". – Male ally

One candidate said "it gave me energy, positive energy. It really surprised me, especially when I was at the point of saying: 'I'm done, I don't want to continue'". Another said her ally "gave me moral support before anything else... he was always pushing me and inspiring me to continue".

One candidate described the positive impact of male support: "the whole village knew I was training to be a candidate… Then, when the political game kicked in and I got excluded, many men came to my house, [and] told me: 'We're with you. Run. We'll support you. Whatever you need."

The outcome of this support was powerful – one woman said male support "really affected me - to know that someone sees hope in me."

Advice and mentoring

Allies offered candidates campaign tips, political analysis, and local knowledge that helped them navigate complex dynamics, and avoid pitfalls.

One candidate said in her area (where she was not originally from) customs, tribes, and traditions are very important, and her male ally helped her understand "how people think". Another ally said "[I helped her with] reading the political reality in the city and understanding it." Another said, "I was with her every day, if not physically, we have 20 calls a day."

Candidates also benefitted from the experience of male allies, with one providing advice based on his years of experience working in elections.

Relationships and trust

Credibility with other men

Allies used their connections and social standing to advocate for women candidates, persuade other men to support them (including women's own families), and counter resistance.

Women described how, once one man trusted her, it became easier to persuade others: "they duplicate behaviour". Another said that her ally provided access to spaces where women aren't allowed: "it would have been harder if I didn't have male allies because you need someone to speak on your behalf in meetings, and only men have access to those."

> "If I had to choose between a man or woman to support my campaign, I'd choose a man… He can influence other men in meetings and discussions." – Female candidate

One candidate described how her ally "applied gentle pressure" to persuade a male family member to withdraw his candidacy. They also described how influential allies requested that families nominate women on their lists.

> "[My male ally] came to my house. He met with my immediate family. And the way he spoke about me — about our work together in associations.… That meeting changed my husband's mindset completely. Imagine — my husband was the biggest obstacle in my path. But after that, he flipped completely." – Female candidate

Networks and introductions

Many allies leveraged their wider networks to help women connect with influential figures and gain visibility in communities.

These connections were used in different ways; for example, one male ally worked with a Winning With Women trainer to persuade the opposing list to accept a woman candidate. A candidate said the men had "great channels", and "opened the door to me - some of them were political and some based on family affiliation."

Other women candidates said their male allies "helped in the public relations, introducing me to other people. They helped… guiding me on what to say to different families and in different settings. Some did it in public, some it was confidential."

Women described the ally as has having "great impact and influence on his circle" One was described as working in local affairs and "had a big influence in [his religious] community".

> "Men are more present in public than women…women are more in touch with each other. But men are more visible in society. Their networks are larger… They usually have wider communication networks—through work, politics, travel, neighbourhood connections… I think that helped." – Female candidate

The result of these new connections was tangible for some candidates: "Even though I didn't win, but I am now very well known in Beirut. From religious men to key people, I am known."

Logistical support

Campaigning and communications

Many male allies took active roles in campaigning and communications, including designing messages, organising meetings, managing social media, and speaking directly to voters.

Allies talked about the candidates in meetings, spoke directly to households, distributed flyers, and provided support on social media.

Others provided strategic support, planning how to best use campaigning time for face to face meetings and online communications. One ally described forming a committee and allocating tasks between other male

> "They were telling voters to vote for me. They were never shy about it." – Female candidate

allies, to make sure the candidate had the most visibility in the community while they took care of behind the scenes work.

One woman described how important male allies who were journalists were: “they wrote about me, invited me for interviews, these were forms of male support”. Another said that her cousin supported her by persuading one side of their family to vote for her.

When the election dates were announced, one of the candidates was still hesitant about her decision to run. Her male ally took the initiative and publicly announced her candidacy on social media, which placed her under the reality of the situation, removed her remaining hesitation, and made her more confident and motivated.

Funding

While funding is a major obstacle to women’s participation in Lebanese local government, few allies were reported to have provided support on this. Two candidates said that their father and husband provided financial support.

One candidate said that her ally suggested that he could have helped to find funding if she had formed her own list, but she hadn’t known how much support she would get.

5. Outcomes of allyship

The main outcome of allyship was attitude changes and increased trust in women's abilities (among male allies and the wider community). Participants developed new knowledge, skills, and relationships - including with civil society. Increased confidence and pride, and an appreciation for collaboration between women and men were also reported.

Wider outcomes included building momentum for change, especially in political parties. Some negative outcomes were noted, including accusations that candidates had relied on allies too much.

Attitude changes and increased trust

Both women candidates and male allies reported changes in views, attitudes, and norms – for them personally and the wider community. Participants welcomed the opportunity to have open discussions, and to develop joint understanding that women and men are not 'competitors' but 'partners'.

Male allies gained respect for women's capabilities, and understood their experiences better. The study visits were an important moment for some allies, where they saw women's ability to lead in real life: "we touched it by hand, and we saw it with our own eyes."

> "We made a change in the thoughts of people who did not believe in women role from displaying the good results and examples." - Male ally

They also saw the obstacles women face, with one saying "it opened my eyes to things I didn't know before, especially from [the women candidate's] side."

Men spoke about the examples they observed as a powerful way to persuade those who "do not believe in the role of women" – "when I was giving them examples, they were embarrassed". One said "when you talk to [a sceptical man], there is a very good chance that you will convince him…. I can plant a seed in his head. Let him think, let him listen."

Women saw increased acceptance and trust within their communities because of men's involvement: "the presence of men supporting me helped shift mindsets". One candidate observed that "if you convince the women only, men will end up telling women who to vote".

Another said that "[voters] need to trust me, trust what I say - they don't look at me as a woman anymore. I am a human being with ideas and solutions and policies, and they respect my opinion". One candidate said "people are looking at me in a different way, the perception changed. I take decisions now for the community."

> "Seeing how their views changed about women — because of me — that's what I loved. They developed trust in women. Remember, we live in a village, a rural area. It wasn't long ago that mentalities began to open up."– Female candidate

New relationships, skills, and knowledge

Participants built valuable networks and relationships, and gained practical knowledge in campaigning, and local governance.

Male allies reported gaining new skills and knowledge about how to recruit candidates, find resources, encourage citizens to vote for women, manage information, and learned about the importance of allyship. This benefitted them and the candidates they work with: "the project gave me a lot of experience and training, and I was able to provide it through coaching, mentoring, guidance, and technical experience."

Allies also reported meeting new people, including women activists, who they "couldn't have met outside of this project". One ally said "I learned a lot of important information, and benefited on the personal level. I met new people. Whether they were men or women. I met a lot of young people, people who I didn't know before. It was a great experience."

One woman candidate said that "the idea of [male allies] listening to me and taking my opinion into consideration is important". She said "the energy, knowledge and experiences we gained from the project shaped her way, noting that "I was the only woman that all lists contacted, this is because since 2019, I've been taking all this training with GPG."

> "The project created a platform for us to be able to communicate with all the eligible people, so that they can ask for support… The main blessing in it was for the project, the tools, and the platforms that the project created, and the relationship that it was able to create." – Male ally

Confidence and pride

Women described feeling more courageous, and proud – one woman said of the male allies: "I felt that I uplifted them, and they uplifted me. It made me so proud. It gives me a lot of confidence and strength."

> "I'm really proud I joined this group. They gave us valuable topics. The best idea was involving men in the training. They felt a sense of responsibility to help spread our message. They played a very important role." – Female candidate

Allyship also made the candidates feel respected and empowered: "let's say now I have an idea or something I want to do—whether political or not—I know now that I have that support. From men."

Many women candidates said they were proud of their own persistence, with one saying "I was on one of the weakest lists in the city. Everyone knew this. And within that context—it gave me weight. It gave me credibility. Now they take me seriously."

Another woman candidate described her approach to the election as "bold and courageous", and said that "some men even said it to me: 'You kept going, even with people around you who didn't resemble you'".

Allies also felt pride in their candidate's achievements, with one saying "it is uncommon to have a man ally to a woman… I was actually proud of it - I was very proud to be next to her."

Understanding benefits of women and men working together

Many interviewees said the collaboration between women and men was mutually beneficial. One candidate said "if a woman is running, she should never do it alone. Surround yourself with men. They are the ones who help you get there."

The male allies component was described as "very important", because "politics is about rights and demands, there is no man and woman. We have to fight together… It was a lovely integration of minds".

An ally observed that the collaboration was important, because when women are elected "there are many laws that do not serve the woman, gender laws, so she is more able to make this change and draft new laws."

A candidate described how she went on to support two young male candidates who approached her for help: "those two young men got the highest support in the elections. And when they won, they both came to me — I was truly happy."

Some allyships also led to longer term connections: "he had great experience with elections, we supported each other and we will keep doing that, we are still friends."

> "As a woman, you genuinely need men. And men need women. You can't move forward without male support in some things. You need it—whether it's for their experience, Or their different way of thinking." – Female candidate

Building momentum for change

> "I consider one of the very successful projects as a proof that I'm with you now. It's not just a project and a fund…This is a very special thing in this project… These women will start to have a positive impact on the future." – Male ally

Women and men participants described the catalytic effect of the project, with effects extending beyond the campaign, plans for future elections, public discourse, and institutional norms.

In relation to political parties, one woman said that "they'll be forced to change eventually. Whether they like it or not, women are here now". Another said "now, these women are part of the political fabric. Society can't push them out anymore."

Another candidate said the effect of allyship as a "snowball", and that "the first circle was challenging [but] then other men joined".

Others said that it created a precedent, and that when men see successful women candidates "they wanted to share the win, so they started telling us that they were with us".

Women used the experience to support other women, both as role models but with practical help too: "I invited Woman mukhtar candidates and introduced them to the men on my list, I wanted to help these women and give them support".

The project inspired other actions, including debates with male friends and colleagues about gender norms, and training in local communities. An ally said that at the university where he works at, he was part of a session on gender-based violence and spoke up for the importance of male allyship.

Negative outcomes

Some women faced reputational harm or felt let down by the men who supported them. One said that the perception of having male allies led to questions about her independence, and another said that some men didn't support her until the end of the process: "if he's a real supporter, he enters the battle and stands next to her and supports her."

6. What we learned about male allyship

We learned that while 'gender-synchronised' programmes can change attitudes and behaviour, they need realistic ambitions and definitions of success that recognise the different starting points and challenges facing both women and men.

Building trust with male allies and supporting them to feel ownership of their actions is key. Programmes should be highly tailored and flexible to the individual needs and journeys of all participants (women and men), rather than working from rigid, fixed curriculums, designed in other countries. Being locally-led (especially by a male project manager) also helped to reduce suspicion and build trust. Using statistics and facts alongside study visit experiences were a powerful combination for learning and understanding.

Overall, allyship is best framed as a collaboration between women and men for the benefit of everyone in society, based on trusting relationships, robust evidence, and real life experience.

Research on international approaches to improving gender equality in politics found that programmes targeting both women and men (separately and together) are more effective than those working with each group in isolation.[37, 38]

Among the 60 Winning With Women project participants surveyed, **95% agreed or strongly agreed that "men's participation in women's campaigns helps shift public attitudes toward women in politics"**, and agreement was highest among the women candidates.

As noted by one of the participants, "the best idea was involving men in the training. They felt a sense of responsibility to help spread our message. They played a very important role."

The outcomes of the project supports the research evidence but there are other lessons to be learned from Winning With Women, which are outlined below.

Being realistic about ambitions but recognising all success

In May 2025, more than 12,000 municipal council members and 3,105 mukhtars were elected. Only 10% of members elected were women (double the proportion in 2016), and 2% of mukhtars.

The Winning With Women project involved 47 women and 24 men. Of these, 28 women decided to run, which dropped to 12 in the days before election day due to family and political reasons. **Seven women won – representing a 58% success rate among the candidates who ran.**

A single, small project involving 71 people cannot change deeply-rooted social, religious, and cultural norms about women's political participation in a country of nearly 6 million. But the learning from the project can inform future programmes and elections (including the national elections scheduled for 2026).

As noted in section 5, **election is not the only metric of success**. Male and female participants changed attitudes towards women's political participation (including within communities), gained valuable knowledge and skills, built new relationships and networks, felt confidence and pride, and created a broader momentum for change, particularly in political parties.

Especially given the recent conflict, and the disruption to candidates' lives, livelihoods, and families, the widest possible measures of success must be used.

Most of the women—45 out of 47—actively participated in the electoral process, reporting that they had the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge gained from the project. Notably, one participant formed and led a youth electoral list in her village and managed their campaign, while another woman successfully led a campaign in a different village. The rest played various supporting roles, including contributing to campaign strategies, designing media plans, contacting voters, and serving as volunteers and or as polling station representatives on election day.

[37] Brechenmacher, S. and Mann, K. (2024) Aiding Empowerment: Democracy Promotion and Gender Equality in Politics.
[38] Gender-synchronised' programming is recommended by Glinski, A., Schwenke, C., O'Brien-Milne, L., & Farley, K. (2018). Gender Equity and Male Engagement: It only works when everyone plays. Washington, D.C.: ICRW

Many of the women actively supported fellow women candidates, even when they weren't running themselves. And support for women candidates was not limited to constituencies where participants themselves voted - the support from the Winning With Women network extended across different regions and constituencies. This support took various forms—from sharing candidates' posts or creating content on social media, to reaching out to friends and relatives in the candidates' towns or cities to introduce their platforms and encourage people to vote for them.

This indicates the **positive catalytic effects of the project, and potentially also its contribution to the increase in the proportion of women elected (from 5% to 10%)**. As one ally noted: "these women will start to have a positive impact on the future".

Trust in the process and people is key

The considered approach to curriculum design (outlined in section 2) led to a high level of trust and commitment among the allies- even those who were initially sceptical. Building long term relationships with participants, understanding their concerns without judgement, addressing their recommendations, and 'walking the talk' by having a Lebanese, male project manager were all important factors.

The **highly tailored and relevant curriculum content** was found to be useful and relevant to the participants' political realities. The involvement of former candidates and elected members also ensured this. One male ally said "you also taught us in one of the trainings how to deal if the financial situation is limited, how to deal with the election campaign." Others highlighted the practical training on recruitment of candidates, encouraging citizens to vote for women, and how to effectively campaign.

Some women in politics projects are found to deliver "curriculums... adapted from templates designed [in Western countries], with only limited input from local organizations or from women candidates themselves". This approach risks emphasising skills and tactics that do not fit local political realities, or the needs of participants. In contrast, the Winning With Women curriculum was tailored for and co-designed with participants.

Importantly, several interviewees also noted that because the **project manager was a man**, he was not perceived as being biased when discussing women's political participation. This helped strengthen trust with male allies and ensured the project's messages were received with greater openness.

The project manager, Moataz, received a lot of praise and respect from interviewees: "I really felt that I was achieving something more than what I had. It added value to me. Being with GPG, and getting to know you, and the team that you work with… You're humble in the sense that you understand, and you're capable, and you know what you're doing."

Being **led by a Lebanese team** also help to build trust and ensure relevance to the context. One male ally interviewed considered that some INGOS have "a goal or a suspicious funding with a goal to destroy society from the inside through giving lectures that talk about freedom". He noted "I'm not talking about you (GPG)".

Given the global backlash against women's rights, this learning will be increasingly important for future work.

Evidence and experience together can have a powerful impact

As noted in section 2, the programme activities used a combination of evidence and experience to take participants along their allyship journey.

Concrete data and facts about the problem of women's political participation were found to be more powerful than abstract ideas about gender equality or feminism. Statistics on gender inequality helped to disprove assumptions that gender equality is no longer an issue, or that women were not equally represented in the political sphere because of their competence. Country rankings such as the Global Gender Gap Report also instigated a sense of competitiveness and national pride.

Many allies cited the study visits as important moments of realisation and learning. One ally said they

allowed him to see the role of women in improving municipal governance for themselves: "I was seeing examples of the great role of women in all these areas. And this is what we touched, as they say, we touched by hand, and we saw it with our own eyes, and we heard from the people."

Another said the study visit was eye opening: "when they heard that a woman was in charge of such issues, they were surprised that she was in charge. Because in their minds, a woman is only for house chores and visits with her husband."

Others said that the study visits gave them an "example" to tell people about, if they were resistant or sceptical about women's political leadership.

Persuading men to give up power

Some scholars suggest that gender equality in politics should be recognised as **"a power struggle between change agents and those who benefit from the status quo"**.[39]

In some ways, this was confirmed by this project: 11 of the 28 candidates who ran for election dropped out because male relatives or political party members were nominated instead.

This demonstrates the 'zero sum' mentality of male political domination – **men may support women in politics in theory, but they do not want to give up their personal position or power to allow it to happen**. Interviewees highlighted this, noting "men say they are supporting, but when it comes to reality they don't support women."

It also underscores the importance of male allies in shifting norms within families, political parties, and municipal governments to answer the critical question: how to convince a man to step aside for a woman?

Male allies who are influential but do not have a direct stake in maintaining current power dynamics (such as older men or political party staff) may therefore be the best targets for allyship. Those who are currently in power and at risk of losing it are most likely to be resistant.

Political party leaders are also key players: if they see that women candidates bring knowledge, skills, and experience alongside political appeal with voters (particularly young people and women), they could be motivated to make space for women on electoral lists.

Recent research found **three types of men who enable other men to support gender equality**: technical assistants who shape how politicians engage with gender issues, older/senior politicians who act as mentors, and 'younger' politicians or new entrants who help build a critical mass of likeminded people.[40]

Rather than framing allyship as a competition between women and men, or as an opportunity for men to 'save' women or steal the spotlight for themselves,[41] **this project preferred to see allyship as a collaboration for better governance**. Using this framing and targeting male allies as described above may therefore be the most effective strategy to persuade men to give up power.

The logic of persuading men to support women candidates

We found that men are motivated to act to support women candidates when:

1. They r**ecognise that the low participation of women in politics is a problem**, and there is an **opportunity cost of not having women represented** in the political sphere,
2. **They see women's political empowerment to be associated with better governance**, as they have valuable knowledge, skills, experiences, and ideas to contribute,
3. They acknowledge **women's electoral appeal to women and younger voters**,
4. They see that **women are excluded from politics not because of their competence or will**, but because of deep-rooted social and gender norms,

[39] Celis, K. and Lovenduski, J. "Power Struggles: Gender Equality in Political Representation," European Journal of Politics and Gender 1, no. 1–2 (July 2018): 149–166, cited in Brechenmacher, S. and Mann, K. (2024) Aiding Empowerment: Democracy Promotion and Gender Equality in Politics.
[40] Michalko, J. & Maycock, M. (2024) Men in politics as agents of gender equitable change: gender norms and political masculinities
[41] Carlson, J., Leek, C., Casey E., et al. (2020) 'What's in a Name? A Synthesis of "Allyship" Elements from Academic and Activist Literature' Journal of Family Violence, 35(8), pp. 889–898 (https://doi.org/10.1007).

5. They understand that **norms negatively affect both women and men, and norms are changeable**,
6. They recognise **men's roles as gatekeepers and allies to shift norms and behaviour** at individual, institutional, and societal levels, and
7. **They act personally to change the status quo** – by standing aside to allow a woman to stand or persuading other men to do so, by supporting women candidates through family or political party lists, or taking other actions to support women candidates, so
8. **Women gain more political power**, so
9. **Everyone can benefit from the better governance** that's associated with women's political participation.

In summary, this project demonstrated the effectiveness of male allyship in combination with capacity building for women candidates. Male allies are particularly useful in building women's credibility with other men, giving access to networks and spaces from which they would have previously been excluded, and building momentum for broader political change.

Fundamentally, increasing the proportion of women in politics means persuading men to give up power. Targeting men who have influence but not an immediate stake in politics is key. And party leaders and those making decisions about electoral lists need to be convinced to act to change the status quo.

By building a critical mass of male allies and women in politics - who shift norms, improve governance, and dispel assumptions about women's ability to lead – the momentum built in the 2025 elections will continue to the national elections and beyond.

> "Women are not weak anymore. I think we've reached further than we expected. These issues are being openly discussed, even on TV. Maybe it hasn't translated into national policies yet, but on the ground, women are speaking up more, and men are helping." – Female candidate

> "Perhaps we will reach a time when all of society will believe in the role of women and there will no longer be resistance". – Male ally

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www.gpgovernance.net
hello@gpgovernance.net

WINNING WITH WOMEN

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ADVANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN LEBANON

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