

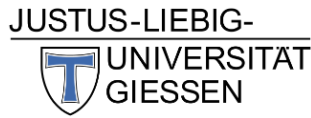


**The EU's approach to Gender Equality and Democracy Support for
Refugee Women in Lebanon:
Recognising the needs of refugee women and amplifying their voices**
Gender Equality Fellowship Author: Amira Elmasry

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The EU's approach to Gender Equality and Democracy Support for Refugee Women in Lebanon: Recognising the needs of refugee women and amplifying their voices

Gender Equality Fellowship Author: Amira Elmasry

About the Author

Amira Elmasry is a junior researcher, development practitioner, and a full-time Erasmus Mundus Scholar pursuing the European Commission Erasmus + Joint Master's Degree in Education Policies for Global Development (GLOBED) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of Bremen, and the University of Cyprus. Amira holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Political Science from Alexandria University in Egypt. Her research interests include but are not limited to global education policies, gender equality, social policy, migration, and youth-civic engagement. Amira has 5+ years of volunteering and professional work experience working with international NGOs and civil society organisations such as CARE International in Egypt, OXFAM Novib, Oxfam in Tunisia, the American University of Beirut, and UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg.

Research Stay

During my one-month research stay at the Carnegie Europe office in Brussels, I focused on exploring the intersections of Democracy, Gender Equality, and their relationship with other crucial areas such as migration, education, employment, and civic participation. Additionally, I learned about the European Union's engagement in the MENA region. Thanks to Carnegie Europe, I had the opportunity to engage with various stakeholders, including the European Endowment for Democracy and Democracy Reporting International. Moreover, I actively participated in sessions and roundtable discussions on civil society and women's participation. Making the most of my time in the EU capital, I've participated in various Gender Equality and Democracy events hosted by esteemed institutions like Carnegie Europe, the European Policy Centre, and the Green European Foundation. These events covered topics such as gender in sustainable energy and energy transition, women's democratic activism, and Europe's new migration pact. These experiences have deepened my understanding and offered valuable insights into critical issues shaping contemporary European affairs.

1. Introduction

'As a female Syrian refugee in Lebanon, I need education and protection against the violence and discrimination inflicted on me. I need work. I need financial and

emotional support, I want to feel safe again and at home, I want to reclaim my house, my land and my properties’.

Said Feryal, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon and participant in ESCWA training for Syrian refugees and Lebanese women in Akkar, Lebanon¹.

Recognising the interdependencies between Gender Equality and Democracy is crucial, given the complexity of this relationship. It relies on overall cultural and societal contexts, emphasising that democratisation remains incomplete without Gender Equality. While equal political and civil rights are foundational to democracy, they prove insufficient without broader and deeper social and economic equality, along with equal access to fundamental rights and citizenship². Democracy cannot flourish unless basic needs are met and human rights are recognised. Democracy, as outlined in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, emphasises individuals’ free will to determine their political, economic, social, and cultural systems, alongside their full participation in all aspects of life. *‘Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing’*³. Democracy, development, and acknowledgment for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interconnected to each other and mutually reinforcing. Therefore, addressing challenges encountered by vulnerable populations, including refugee women, necessitates comprehensive, inclusive, and human-rights based approaches. These approaches should prioritise access to fundamental human rights, such as protection services, education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, legal assistance, and psychosocial support. By doing so, we not only fulfil immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for a more democratic society where every voice is valued, and every individual can thrive and participate in social, civil, political, and economic life. Challenging discriminatory norms and promoting gender equality are essential components of this endeavour. In the context of this report, addressing the needs and rights of refugee women in Lebanon is crucial for advancing gender equality and democracy. This involves addressing

¹ ESCWA Continues to Train Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Women in Akkar Website: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA). Retrieved from <https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-continues-train-syrian-refugees-and-lebanese-women-akkar> Accessed: [01.04.2024].

² Gawrich, A., & Konrad, L. (2024). Deliverable No. D1.2: Working Paper on Gender Equality. SHAPEDEM-EU – Rethinking and Reshaping the EU’s democracy support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood. Justus-Liebig-University.

³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>.

underlying gender inequalities, promoting inclusion and participation, and upholding human rights principles for all individuals, irrespective of their refugee status.

The report starts with an examination of the conceptual foundations and theoretical perspectives on gender and gender equality, followed by a brief overview of the gender equality landscape in Lebanon with a particular emphasis on the experiences of refugee women. Afterwards, it will present an in-depth look into the European Union's strategies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and democracy within Lebanon. Finally, the report will conclude with a review and evaluation of the EU's approach, coupled with recommendations for enhancing its efficacy and degree of responsiveness in advancing gender equality in Lebanon with respect to refugee women.

2. Gender Equality: A Conceptual Framework

Gender Equality encompasses two intertwined concepts: Gender and Equality, both subject to interpretation. Gender pertains to aspects such as the division of labour, reproductive relations, and sexual differences, while Equality is often linked to factors like race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or social class⁴. Gender equality forms part of a multidimensional understanding of equality. Hence, it's crucial to view Gender within an intersectional framework. Black, postcolonial, and socialist feminist scholars within the liberal approach recognised the intersectionality and interdependence of multiple forms of discrimination, such as classist, racial, (dis)ability-related, ethnic, or religious dimensions⁵. Reflecting on the intersectionality between gender and migration, it is undeniable that gender inequalities and gendered structures of power and domination have an impact at all stages of a migration journey. Starting from influencing the decisions or motivations for departure, affecting access to mobility and creating situations of gendered and racialised vulnerability in countries of transit and destination. Moreover, discrimination and marginalisation experienced by refugee and migrant women should not be perceived solely due to their gender, but also to their membership of other, frequently more marginalised, groups. For instance, consider a refugee woman who is poor, black, and Sunni Muslim. Such intersectionality between gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic background, ethnicity and other axes of social inequality, thus there are different levels of exposure to violence, and vulnerability as well as for opportunities for people on the move. According to UN women, connecting gender equality with sustainable development is crucial for

⁴ Lombardo, E., Meier, P., & Verloo, M. (Eds.). (2009). *The Discursive Politics of Gender Equality: Stretching, Bending and Policy-Making* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁵ See Gawrich, A., & Konrad, L. (2024). Deliverable No. D1.2: Working Paper on Gender Equality. SHAPEDEM-EU – Rethinking and Reshaping the EU's democracy support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood. Justus-Liebig-University.

multiple reasons. Initially, it stands as a moral and ethical necessity: fostering fairer gender dynamics that uphold the human rights, dignity, and potentials of women, taking into account diverse factors such as class, race, sexuality, age, ability, and circumstances, forms a fundamental component of an ethical global framework⁶.

According to Beer, the concept of 'Gender Equality', illustrates its dynamic nature as the concept has evolved over time and across regions, which makes gender equality a multifaceted and highly debated concept⁷. Initially, it was primarily associated with political and policy objectives. For instance, the EU linked it to addressing unfair competition, but over the past two decades, the focus has shifted towards combating unemployment. In the 1990s, there was an emphasis on achieving full employment and building a knowledge economy, while the most recent emphasis has been on fighting discrimination and promoting diversity. Additionally, the UN has interconnected Gender Equality with development, while individual countries have associated it with civil rights and labour market conditions (De Gruyter, 2012). Scholars generally agree that gender equality should be evaluated across three domains: capabilities, opportunities, and empowerment/agency⁸. A clear and straightforward definition of Gender Equality presented by Griffin in 2017 states that Gender equality is defined as 'the notion of equal treatment and equal opportunities for women and men, irrespective of their sexed identity'.⁹ Gender equality entails ensuring that women and men have equitable conditions to exercise their full human rights and contribute to, as well as benefit from, economic, social, cultural, and political development. It encompasses the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women, men, girls, and boys. According to the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE), gender equality aims to eliminate discrimination based on gender rather than advocating for the sameness of women and men. It asserts that individuals' rights, responsibilities, and opportunities should not be determined by their gender at birth. Moreover, gender equality entails recognising and addressing the interests, needs, and priorities of both women and men, acknowledging the diversity within these groups. It emphasises the active engagement of both genders, as it is not solely a women's issue. Gender equality is recognised as a human rights imperative and a prerequisite for sustainable, people-

⁶ UN Women. (2016). Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: A Pathways Approach. Discussion Paper No. 13. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2016/DPS-Gender-equality-sustainable-development.pdf>.

⁷ Beer, C. (2009). Democracy and Gender Equality. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 44(3), 212-227. DOI: 10.1007/s12116-009-9043-2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gawrich, A., & Konrad, L. (2024). Deliverable No. D1.2: Working Paper on Gender Equality. SHAPEDEM-EU – Rethinking and Reshaping the EU's democracy support in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood. Justus-Liebig-University.

centred development, requiring the creation of an inclusive environment that empowers individuals of all genders¹⁰. In patriarchal societies like those found in the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon, merely focusing on equal rights and responsibilities overlooks the historical advantages men have had over women. Therefore, it is essential to recognise that gender equality extends beyond providing equal resources to men and women. There is a need to establish fair conditions and an enabling environment for women to leverage those resources into valuable skills and to attain equal standing with men.

3. Gender Equality in Lebanon

Lebanon is a unique case study in the MENA region, characterised by sectarian divides, religious and political conflicts, unprecedented financial crises exacerbated by severe events like the Beirut blast, in addition to poor governance, and low levels of security and safety. These factors are closely connected with the persisting gender inequalities within the country. Lebanon's internal stability and its political, social, and economic dynamics have been directly impacted by regional conflict dynamics. The influx of refugees, including Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi populations, alongside the ongoing Syrian conflict, has contributed to and exacerbated existing sectarian and ethnic divisions in the country¹¹. Thus, Lebanon is currently experiencing a fragile political, social, and economic context that restricts any progress in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment, especially among vulnerable groups such as refugee and migrant communities that are likely to be left out or overlooked. In Lebanon, women regardless of their cultural, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds experience substantial gender-based violence, restricted engagement in civic, economic and political spaces, as well as limited access to job opportunities compared to their male counterparts. However, these obstacles are even exacerbated for refugee and migrant women, who confront additional social, cultural, and legal barriers to obtain their rights and achieve gender parity. As marginalised groups in Lebanese society, they consistently face exclusion and encounter challenges in accessing legal protections and support from international organisations and civil society.

Understanding how the European Union supports Gender Equality in Lebanon requires recognising the diffuse nature of the concept of 'Gender Equality' as well as its varied interpretations by the EU itself and within Lebanon's unique cultural, social, and economic local context as the understanding of what gender equality entails in practice is not homogeneous in

¹⁰ European Institute for Gender Equality. (2024). Gender mainstreaming. Retrieved from https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1059?language_content_entity=en.

¹¹ Avis, W. R. (2017). Gender equality and women's empowerment in Lebanon. University of Birmingham. August 16, 2017.

Europe or the neighbourhoods where different challenges and achievements co-exist. The Council of Europe defines Gender Equality as ‘equal rights for women and men, girls and boys, as well as the same visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation, in all spheres of public and private life. It also implies equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men’¹². Whereas in Arabic, the word ‘Gender’ is translated as ‘Alnaw’a al ejtima’ai’, which literally means the social type, but this translation does not fully capture or reflect the conceptual essence of the term. Indeed, Gender remains a confusing term in the MENA region, often exclusively associated with ‘women’ or ‘women's affairs’.

Lebanon has one of the most vibrant and dynamic feminist movements in the Arab region and has shown relative progress in granting women equal rights and involving them in politics compared to neighbouring countries in the MENA region. However, the journey toward gender equality and sustainable development in Lebanon remains constrained and limited. Despite the Lebanese constitution's provision of equal rights for all citizens and the nation's ratification of significant international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), achieving gender parity remains a formidable challenge. Nonetheless, Lebanon's legal framework demonstrates a commitment to improving laws and living conditions for women. The adoption of gender mainstreaming in data collection and analysis has further enhanced the legal infrastructure, facilitating women's engagement in income-generating activities. Despite these strides, significant obstacles to gender equality persist. Lebanon ranks 145th out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2020, indicating the highest gender gaps globally. Moreover, Lebanon faces numerous hurdles hindering gender equality, particularly concerning women's economic participation, with only 29% of women active in the labour market compared to 76% of men¹³. These low rates of female labour force participation in Lebanon have even exacerbated during the pandemic with increased job losses, decreased salaries for women, and heightened household and caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, entrenched patriarchal norms, particularly prevalent in rural areas, perpetuate disparities by emphasising traditional social roles for women over economic pursuits, a trend observed even before the recent crisis. Legally, one significant obstacle is the presence of incomplete and misinterpreted laws and regulations, creating loopholes that impede regulatory institutions from effectively enforcing those laws and promoting women's economic,

¹² Council of Europe. Gender Equality at a Glance. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/at-a-glance>.

¹³ UN Women. (2024). Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/countries/lebanon#:~:text=Lebanon%20has%20one%20of%20the,women%20and%2076%25%20for%20men>.

social, and political engagement. Furthermore, spousal and domestic violence rates reached around 25% as women also have limited representation in politics with women holding only 4.6% of seats in Parliament. Although there are policies designed to promote women's involvement in the economy, their execution is often impeded due to impractical goals and fragmented decision-making procedures spanning legislative, regulatory, private sector, and civil society spheres (UN Women, 2021).

4. Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

Among Lebanon's population of 6.5 million citizens, the country accommodates 1.5 million Syrian refugees, as of July 2019, with 926,717 registered by UNHCR. This makes Lebanon hosting the largest concentration of refugees per capita. Furthermore, there are an additional 11,238 refugees from other nationalities. Notably, women and girls comprise more than half of the refugee population (El Asmar, Shawaf, and Mikdashi, 2019).

Refugee communities in Lebanon encounter significant obstacles in safeguarding their basic human rights. Among these challenges, refugee women endure heightened susceptibilities to gender-based violence, exacerbated by dire living conditions and economic instability. These difficulties are compounded by restricted educational opportunities, financial struggles, and patriarchal cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based violence. Additionally, access to healthcare services, particularly reproductive and mental health care, is inadequate and limited. Furthermore, there is a lack of sufficient psychological support to address the trauma resulting from conflict and displacement, hindering personal development. UN Women reports that Syrian refugee women in Lebanon grapple with highly precarious situations, characterised by the absence of civil documentation, family separation, unstable housing, food insecurity, interrupted education, and restricted freedom of movement. These factors not only heighten the risk of gender-based violence but also diminish opportunities for workforce participation. Refugee women in Lebanon also encounter legal barriers, including insufficient documentation and limited access to the labour market as the Lebanese authorities classify them as displaced persons, denying them many basic rights, including the right to work. This lack of economic empowerment constrains their autonomy and decision-making abilities. For example, refugee populations, including Palestinians, Syrians, migrant domestic workers, and stateless persons, are effectively excluded from Lebanese labour laws. Moreover, refugee and migrant women in Lebanon work longer hours, receive lower wages, and are excluded from social protection schemes. Lebanon's pursuit of gender equality is further complicated by intersecting factors. Despite recent legislative efforts such as the passing of a sexual harassment law in 2020, its implementation remains problematic, operating independently from both labour law and the

penal code, lacking clear enforcement mechanisms, and excluding vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, and the LGBTIQ+ community. Early marriage rates are higher among refugee communities compared to Lebanese nationals, exacerbating vulnerabilities, particularly among girls. In addition, refugee girls face an elevated risk of early marriage and exploitation due to economic hardship, compounded by prejudice based on their refugee status, gender, and socioeconomic background, leaving them in precarious situations. Overall, refugee women and girls encounter the highest levels of food insecurity and are significantly more likely to lack legal residence or access to adequate shelter, hindering their access to education and economic opportunities¹⁴.

A baseline survey conducted by UNICEF during 2015–2016 found that rates of early marriage were markedly higher among Palestinian refugees from Syria and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon when compared to Lebanese nationals. Additionally, the 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) shows that a significant portion of Syrian refugee females aged 15–19 were either married, engaged, separated, divorced, or widowed, with rates far exceeding those among Syrian refugee boys. Gender-based violence, which represents a pervasive manifestation of gender inequality in Lebanon, poses a significant threat to women and girls, particularly within informal settlements and camps hosting Syrian refugees¹⁵. Addressing these issues requires dedicated efforts to ensure legal protections, economic opportunities, and comprehensive support services for all refugee populations, with a focus on promoting gender equality and safeguarding women's rights.

5. EU Instruments for Supporting Gender Equality in Lebanon

Despite the EU's commitment to support women in Lebanon and address gender equality in its Southern Mediterranean partner countries, EU policies in Lebanon are perceived as disconnected from the local reality. This perception arises from the urgent demands for social justice and adequate public services. This detachment from reality is evident across three significant issues concerning democracy and human rights in Lebanon: conflict, migration, and gender. According to the European Commission official documents, EU involvement in supporting gender equality and democracy in Lebanon operates within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its southern dimension, known as the 'Renewed Partnership with Southern Neighbourhood'. The EU-Lebanon Partnership Priorities, adopted at the EU-Lebanon Association

¹⁴ UN Women. (2024). Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/countries/lebanon#:~:text=Lebanon%20has%20one%20of%20the,women%20and%2076%25%20for%20men>.

¹⁵ UNHCR Lebanon. (2020). Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) 2020. Retrieved from https://lalebanon.unhcr.org/vasyr/files/vasyr_reports/VASyR%202020.pdf.

Council on 11 November 2016, set out the framework for EU political engagement and enhanced cooperation with Lebanon. They aim to support Lebanon's development as a stable, democratic, politically open, and economically strong country and promote reforms. The promotion and protection of human rights are overarching themes for EU assistance in Lebanon, aligned with the European consensus on development. To realise the defined priorities, the EU has identified three working approaches to promoting gender equality: (1) gender equality through policy and political dialogue, (2) gender mainstreaming, and (3) directed gender equality programming¹⁶.

The European Commission is implementing its Gender Action Plan III 2021-2025 (GAP III) as part of its external actions on Gender Equality, particularly with partners like Lebanon. This plan, adopted in November 2020, aligns with the EU's internal 2020-2025 gender equality strategy and outlines priorities for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls on a global scale. Emphasising SDG 5, the plan aims to address the underfunded nature of gender equality initiatives globally by ensuring that 85% of new external actions by 2025 prioritise gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Progress has been noted, with the share of such actions increasing from 58% in 2016 to 65% in 2019. To achieve the 85% target, the EU will enforce three minimum standards across all externally funded programmes. Additionally, support for gender-responsive budgeting will be bolstered through programmes targeting public finance management. The EU's External Investment Plan will integrate actions to overcome barriers to women's empowerment, and gender mainstreaming will be applied to blending operation funds and guarantees. Implementation of this strategy will employ a dual approach of targeted measures for gender equality along with strengthened gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming will be enhanced by systematically integrating a gender perspective at all stages of policy design across all EU policy areas, both internal and external¹⁷.

Furthermore, the European Commission affirms that gender equality and women's empowerment are core objectives of EU external action. The EU actively promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in its international partnerships, political and human rights dialogues with third countries, trade policy, as well as in its neighbourhood and enlargement policies, including during accession negotiations and within the Stabilization and Association Process. Gender-related actions are also integrated into EU interventions in fragile, conflict, and

¹⁶ European Commission. (n.d.) Lebanon - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, accessed [10.04.2024], https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/lebanon_en.

¹⁷ European Commission. (2021). Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis Report 2021. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/bc667c01-1b39-4387-a5c8-b18e64c23b68_en?filename=SDG-Report-05-MD.pdf.

emergency situations. In the context of collaboration between the EU and Lebanon, substantial assistance has been provided by the EU to address challenges arising from the influx of Syrian refugees. Since 2011, this assistance has amounted to over €3 billion, including €670.3 million through bilateral channels. Specifically, €1.5 billion has been allocated for resilience assistance via the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, established in 2015. This funding aims to assist Lebanon in managing the repercussions of the Syrian conflict by enhancing the resilience of Syrian refugees, promoting self-reliance, and supporting Lebanese host communities. Additionally, €860 million has been earmarked for humanitarian aid, targeting the urgent needs of Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese populations. Furthermore, initiatives promoting stability and peace have been supported with €61 million, while €2.7 million has been allocated for projects under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights¹⁸. Moreover, the European Union actively supports efforts to reduce gender gaps and combat gender-based violence in Lebanon. For example, the EU for Women Empowerment (EU4WE) project, initiated in 2020, aims to advance full equality between men and women in Lebanon by reducing gender-based violence, empowering women, and strengthening existing institutional mechanisms for gender equality, for example by establishing sustainable legal assistance for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and enhancing the skills of current legal practitioners in handling GBV cases. Additionally, the programme offers training, mentorship, and coaching to aspiring entrepreneurs, along with financial assistance in the form of grants (EU, 2020).

6. Reviewing the European Union's Efforts to Advance Gender Equality in Lebanon

Upon reviewing documents detailing projects and initiatives introduced by the EU for its neighbour Lebanon, it's apparent that limited attention has been paid to refugee and migrant women. They are either entirely absent or are slightly mentioned as beneficiaries or marginalised groups that need to be protected, rather than being acknowledged as potential agents of change and potential assets to the society. Considering gender intersectionality with other social axes, while migration was mentioned in the strategy, poverty and low socio-economic status have been neglected. Therefore, discussing empowerment and human rights is not meaningful if basic needs are unmet and individuals lack dignity. Also, after reviewing papers on European Union external policy-making in the Middle East and North Africa, the previous research often suggests that the EU is not successfully promoting democracy in the region. Scholars attribute reasons for this failure to various factors. Some scholars argue that the EU's inability is due to institutional

¹⁸ Ibid.

shortcomings, while others postulate that current policies are designed to fail due to the realist needs and interests of the European Union itself.

‘The most vital human right is to have our voices heard as women,’ stated Said Feryal, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon and participant in ESCWA training for Syrian refugees and Lebanese women in Akkar, Lebanon¹⁹.

The EU often employs a needs-based approach rather than a rights-based or human rights-based approach that recognises individuals' potential and empowers them as agents of change with agency and autonomy over their choices and rights advocacy. The language and terminology used in the strategy often depict refugee women in a weak and passive context such as victims or beneficiaries, overlooking their assets and potential contributions to the economy and country's development²⁰. Patriarchal values act as a barrier to gender equality, yet women's empowerment is important not just for women themselves but also for their families, their countries and the global economy, as well as creating a necessary condition for women's participation in any political process (Moghadam 2013). Lack of progress in gender justice and equity holds back socioeconomic and political development (World Bank, 2023). The EU's mission is not supposed to be charitable at the first place but developmental, grounded in a commitment to global gender equality and human rights. This requires recognising individuals as agents of change and empowering them to advocate for their own rights by optimising their potential. As refugees, the limited influence that women have over decisions about their lives and futures is further constrained, as existing inequalities are exacerbated by conflict and displacement²¹.

Scholars also suggest that while the EU has demonstrated commitment to supporting women in Lebanon and integrating a gender perspective into its programmes, there is a lack of an overarching strategy to mainstream gender sensitivity in its cooperation policies concerning migration and asylum. Additionally, there is a notable absence of specific gender policies. Moreover, discussions surrounding female migration are often underrepresented in both European and South and Eastern Mediterranean dialogues and discussions. Issues such as the emigration of women in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region alone, female refugees

¹⁹ ESCWA Continues to Train Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Women in Akkar Website: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA). Retrieved from <https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-continues-train-syrian-refugees-and-lebanese-women-akkar> Accessed: [01.04.2024].

²⁰ Ghosheh, H. (2019). EU Approach to Gender Equality in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Region. MEDRESET Policy Papers No. 9, April 2019.

²¹ Lafrenière, J., Sweetman, C., & Thylin, T. (2019). Introduction: Gender, humanitarian action, and conflict. Women's Economic Participation in Lebanon: A Mapping Analysis of Laws and Regulations.

in Lebanon and domestic workers in Lebanon, ‘left behind’, are systematically left out of the picture²².

Despite the European Union's (EU) efforts to promote gender equality through legal and political frameworks, policy dialogues, gender mainstreaming, and targeted programming in partner countries, there exists a significant disparity between its approach to gender equality internally and externally. This indicates a tendency towards a ‘power over’ approach and limited substantive transformation. EU support often consists of short-term projects aligned with international or EU priorities, disregarding local needs and failing to incorporate diverse voices adequately. Reports highlight inconsistent attention to gender equality across sectors, with EU priorities often stemming from internal EU or global trends, rather than addressing local concerns effectively. Additionally, the EU's focus on self-interest and security post-Arab Spring has sometimes conflicted with its commitment to human rights and gender equality in partner regions. Recommendations underscore the necessity for the EU to adopt a more critical stance on prioritising human rights violations, including women's rights, in its external engagements.

7. Recommendations

The EU can take several proactive steps to promote Gender Equality and Democracy among refugee women in Lebanon, as follows:

1. Policy Advocacy and Diplomacy

The EU can use its diplomatic influence to advocate for policies that prioritise the rights and needs of refugee women in Lebanon. This includes urging the Lebanese government to enact legislation that protects refugee women from gender-based violence, ensures their access to education and healthcare, and facilitates their legal integration. The EU should identify and mobilise its existing resources, working in a cohesive manner to leverage its distinct capacity in promoting rights-based democratic processes, particularly concerning refugee women.

2. Financial Support and Aid

The EU can offer funding to support grassroots local initiatives and informal groups in Lebanon that assist refugee women across various areas, including basic needs like health, education, psychological support, legal assistance, labour market access, economic empowerment, and civic participation.

3. Capacity Building and Training

²² Ghosheh, H. (2019). EU Approach to Gender Equality in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Region. MEDRESET Policy Papers No. 9, April 2019.

The EU can provide technical assistance and capacity-building support to local organisations and service providers working with refugee women. It is essential to utilise potential or assets that refugee women already possess in different fields such as agriculture, handcrafts, etc and build upon this expertise so they can utilise their talents and capacities. This could also involve training healthcare professionals on gender-sensitive care, providing legal support to refugee women with documentation issues, and equipping educators with tools to support refugee girls' access to education.

4. Enabling Environment for Refugee Women

As we advocate for women to come out and learn and work and deal with the world. It is also very essential to make sure that they live within a safe and inclusive and enabling environment free of exclusion, discrimination, stigma, exploitation or gender-based violence. The EU should work closely with Lebanese authorities and advocacy groups to push for legislative reforms that enable refugee women to work, access the labour market and credit, and protect their basic rights. It's also crucial to support local grassroots organisations that focus on the legal, economic, and social rights of refugee women.

5. Active engagement in Decision Making

Refugee women need to speak for themselves and advocate for themselves and actively participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, it is essential to perform community-based consultations with local actors and representatives of refugee women. This ensures that their voices are heard, allowing them to express their opinions and articulate their needs and expectations regarding assistance programmes and initiatives implemented by the EU, as well as other international or local organisations.

6. Gender Mainstreaming in Policies and Programmes

The EU integrates a gender perspective into all its interventions and programmes in Lebanon, thereby addressing the specific needs and priorities of refugee women. However, it is crucial to go beyond mere gender sensitivity and adopt a gender-responsive and transformative approach. This approach is necessary for challenging and changing entrenched gender norms and power imbalances. Additionally, it's important to recognise the intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination, particularly focusing on marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples, racial/ethnic/religious minorities, and women with disabilities

7. Regular Evidence-based Monitoring and Evaluation

The EU can establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of its interventions on refugee women in Lebanon. This involves collecting data, measuring outcomes, and soliciting feedback from participant refugee women to ensure that programmes are responsive to their needs and achieve meaningful results.

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