



## THE WOMEN EDUCATION IN LEBANON: LESSONS FOR MIDDLE EAST

### La formación educativa de la mujer en el Líbano: lecciones para Oriente Medio

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper analyzes the educational system in Lebanon, its components, and the successful progress of the female integration in this neutralization fifteen years ago till now. A well-oriented perspective for the foundation of the Lebanese educational institutions is dissected starting with the establishment of the foreign schools, and then reaching the expansion of the public schools where an urgent necessity is needed to fill the gap to realize a better public quality education. Results show challenging data regarding the illiteracy situation of Lebanon among other neighbor countries. The present study reveals that the feminine power is being more prevalent in the educational system starting from early stages and becomes more dominant at a later level. This work shows that the best way to provide a brighter future for women in Middle East in general and Lebanon in particular is through the improvement of educational and cultural bridge between Lebanon and the rest of the world, for that implementation the bilingualism in the education system plays a key role.

**Key words:** Women, Education, Lebanon, illiteracy, bilingualism.

**RESUMEN:** Este trabajo analiza el sistema educativo en el Líbano, sus componentes y el proceso exitoso de la integración de la mujer en los últimos 15 años. Se analiza el diseño del sistema educativo desde la fundación de las instituciones educativas libanesas, empezando con el establecimiento de las escuelas extranjeras, para luego llegar a la expansión de las escuelas públicas donde se necesita una urgente necesidad de llenar el vacío de realizar una mejor educación pública de calidad. Respecto a la situación de analfabetismo, los resultados muestran unos datos muy prometedores alcanzados del Líbano comparado con los países de su entorno. El presente estudio revela que la presencia de la mujer está siendo más relevante en el sistema educativo a partir de las primeras etapas y se vuelve más dominante en un nivel posterior. Este trabajo pone de manifiesto que la mejor manera de ofrecer un futuro más prometedor a las mujeres de oriente medio en general y las del Líbano en particular es a través de la mejora del puente educativo y cultural entre el Líbano y el resto del mundo, y para ello la implantación del bilingüismo en el sistema educativo juega una papel clave.

**Palabras clave:** mujer, educación, Líbano, analfabetismo, bilingüismo.

El Khaled, D., Novas, N., Gázquez, J. A., García, R. M., y Manzano-Agugliaro, F. (2016). The women education in Lebanon: lessons for Middle East. *Espiral. Cuadernos del Profesorado*, 9(18), 27-36. Disponible en: <http://www.cepcuevasolula.es/espiral>.

Fecha de recepción: 16/09/2015  
Fecha de aceptación: 23/11/2015

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### Table of acronyms

<i>Nomenclature</i>	Definition
<i>CERD</i>	Center of Educational and Research Development
<i>CIA</i>	Center Intelligence Agency
<i>CIDA</i>	Canadian International Development Agency
<i>CSA</i>	Cloud Security Alliance
<i>IFES</i>	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
<i>IWPR</i>	Institute for Women Policy Research
<i>IWSAW</i>	Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World
<i>MD</i>	Medical doctorate
<i>NHDR</i>	National Human Development Report
<i>PhD</i>	Doctor
<i>UNDP</i>	United Nation Development Program

### Introduction

Lebanon has been justifiably well known, recognized, and moreover recommended for its good standards universities and the praised quality of its education systems all over the world (Frayha, 2009). After being committed to the United Nations Charter, Lebanon has enshrined the right for education and promised to maintain the good quality of education. While the Lebanese infrastructure has highly endured from the 16 years old bloody civil war, the educational system was lucky enough to survive in these violent circumstances emerge and grow rapidly in consideration of the miserable situation the country was left. Nevertheless, the Lebanese educational system has not been affected by the social inequality or sectarian divisions but has collapsed these basic social factors to reinforce itself especially after all the political instability problems that haven't stopped even after the civil war (Khazaaal, 2007). However, sectarian identities continue to play a role in educational institutions in postwar (Habbal, 2012). The Cedar country has always been the mostly confidential place for all the Middle East neighbor families to send their children to seek better education (Haghighat, 2014). The historic heritage of Lebanon has succeeded in establishing and shaping a well-formed educational system. Despite the size of country, Lebanon has offered substantial contributions in the formulations of the Universal Declarations of human rights (Murrithi, 2007). The country has excelled in building healthy environment for the Lebanese women rights to emerge in historical and political context confirming democracy. Moreover, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an unpredictable increase in the number of female writers, philosophic, journalists and political activists (Kerry & Breslin, 2010).

The Lebanese educational system has profited from the various religious communities that came to Lebanon and established religious private schools, thus majority of the private schools hold some direct dependence to western clerics. With the coming of the Jesuits foundation in the early seventeenth century (1625), the Maronites were the first to establish religious schools in Lebanon, the Presbyterian missionaries in 1866, then the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian, thus producing a dense diversity of French, Italian and Anglo Saxon. In addition, local and secular private schools have been established, and many other Muslim schools supported by some wealthy Islamic nations were founded in the capital such as "Makasid", and were also of a great success (Al-Hadbai, 1982). Nevertheless, on high studies level, the American University in Beirut was founded in the 1866 with the name of "Syrian Evangelical College", the University of Saint Joseph in 1877 (Soweid et al., 2003). As stated in the article 8 of the 1926 Lebanese constitution, the legislation in educational system has permitted the wide spread of each community in establishing schools and diversifying the systems. All these



foreign interventions gave the educational system in Lebanon this multinational nature reflecting the Lebanese educational openness, which has allowed this system to escape from the pain of the civil war. Not to forget that this diversity is playing a big role in shaping the educational system today. However, this diversity has its negative influence on the Lebanese Education. The system has not been able through the years to cease the sectarian divisions; at the contrary it has amplified the rift embedded from the regional conflicts (Heng, 2009). In the world economic forum in Dakar, in 2 000, according to a study, an educational system is designated as weak if it “reinforces social fissures that can represent dangerous sources of conflict” (Tawil and Harley, 2004). Unfortunately, Lebanon falls definitely under this category. Till the mid 1920’s most of the schools were private. However, the demand for learning was growing in the country and the number of students at public schools has risen to more than two fifth of the total enrollment, so the government couldn’t rely on private schools and was in urgent need to open more public schools and universities. Following the independence in 1943, major efforts were directed towards giving control and authority for the Ministry of Education to take over by controlling private schools and encouraging public schools (El-Ghali, 2012). The objective of this paper is to introduce the educational system structure in Lebanon and highlight the important role of the Lebanese female in it by presenting data for the improved number of literate women, during the recent years and up till now in schools and higher education on one hand. On the other hand, the quality female contribution in the teaching sector which reflects the Lebanese feminine intention for better and higher degrees. Moreover, the data presented reveals a very fast and efficient leap the women are achieving in comparison with the male educational levels. These facts are worth to be valued and emphasized to encourage the Lebanese women engage further in this truly challenging educational competition for a brighter Lebanese future.

## Illiteracy

There are no universal standard for defining literacy (Sedgwick, 2000). Thus, the common way to estimate this rate at as specific country is by determining the numbers of people who write and read. According to Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) world factBook, and following the criteria of estimating literacy among people aging 15 and plus, whom can read and write, the literacy rate in Lebanon scored 89.6%. The Male literacy was detected to be 93.4% while the female literacy reached 86% as shown in figure 1 (Galey, 2009).

These numbers look pretty good but need more precision. According to the program of Adult Literacy, Lebanon, with a 4 100 000 population, shows up to be among the highest countries in the Middle East in the level of youth literacy and adult literacy scoring 96% and 88.3% respectively (pretty much close to the CIA world factBook estimations). The program is based on

the UNESCO institute for lifelong learning. However, with the Information technology and Communication Systems conquering our world today, the literacy level is no more limited to basic reading and numeracy skills, but it entails the effective use of computing (Unesco, 2014) Beirut was named as the 2009 World Book capital, referring to the data obtained saying that only 6.1% of the adulthood in Beirut cannot read and write. By contrast, this rate is not the same among all the Lebanese provinces, it has reached 16.7% in Nabatyeh and 16.9% in Bekaa. After collecting data from various investigations, this high discrepancy pushes the National Human Development Report (NHDR), to raise the call for urgent close of this educational gap (Aloui, 2014). The project Director of the NHDR Maha Nahya, attributed this cause not to the unavailability or quality of goods but to the difficulty in accessing them. The report also raised the awareness of the gender literacy. In fact, many

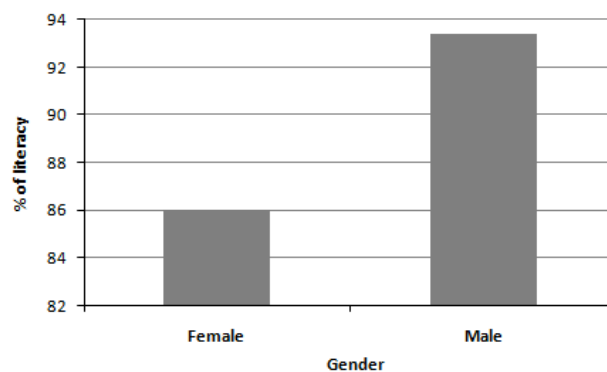


Figure 1. Percentage level of literacy in 2007 for both genders.



Lebanese females are still lagging behind their males in the ability to read. Anita Nassar, the assistant Director of the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University stated a difficulty in persuading the rural families in sending their girls to schools, and the progress is considered slow. The improvement of the literacy levels in North Lebanon, Bekaa and South Lebanon is highly correlated with improving the income generated at these regions (Galey, 2009).

Figure 2 presents the level of illiteracy as a percentage among the adult aging 15 and plus for fifteen consecutive age categories forming the following graph shape. To come up with the graph, data from the Center of Educational and Research Development (CERD) were needed (El-Jouni, 2010). The graph reveals two important factors.

First of all, the illiteracy levels for both genders are increasing proportionally with age. This is a positive and vital sign showing that young Lebanese children are being sent to schools and are taught to learn in contradiction with the situation 80 years ago, where the levels of illiteracy for both genders were pretty high, especially that the educational needs of adolescent girls have never really been met by schools leading to a variety of social, emotional and aspirational problems for girls and women alike (Wiens, 2014). Second of all, the existent gap between the males and females aging 40 and above is being narrowed to be null at the age of 15. This negligible difference enlightens the families' awareness nowadays of sending not only their boys to schools, but their girls as well. True gender equality is a continuous and collective responsibility that requires a lot of care (Reid and Miller, 2014).

In this part of our study we will focus on collecting gender data indicator in order to monitor the gender shaping of the Lebanese education system in both public and private schools. The data collected and obtained will be a vital sign for the social and economic gender equality in the Lebanese community. The sources are mainly the Center of Education and Research Development that focuses on surveying continuously the modification in the numbers of students, faculty and school in schools and higher education institutions. Other important sources are the Cloud Security Alliance (CSA) surveys studying the state of children in Lebanon MICS II, the Lebanon Family Health survey 2004. Here it is important to mention that there is an important gap in the introduction of gender aspects in the available surveys and studies. Hence, the urgent call for better tabulations of the existing and future data. When it comes to the gender division, statistics prove that males and females rates are very approximate for the first levels of education. For instance, females constitute about 52.3% of the total students enrolled in intermediate schools with the rest 47.7% for males. However, for the higher education levels, the variance is more critical with 55.8% of females and only 44.2% of males enrolled. Considering that the net enrolment rates are somehow close at the elementary level, the approximate rates reveal the progress in the Lebanese mentality towards educating both gender children. However, for the secondary, the net enrollment rates are significantly higher for women. And this may be due to the fact that some males are obliged to drop out of school to support their families or to study abroad. The Lebanese mentality, being improved towards the necessity of education for women, still forces too many young boys to start paving their career life earlier with no university degree by working as a craftsman or in a family business heritage (Khoury and Moghadam, 2014). Economic restrictions play a huge role in this drift that may not be a matter of choice for most of the young males.

At the secondary level, for the Arts and Humanities, females present 83.4% of the total students enrolled in comparison with 16.6% left for the males. Thus, the ratio of girls to boys in the selection of Arts and Humanities is 5.03. For the Sociology and Economy, females present 58.5% of the total students enrolled in comparison with 41.5% left for the males (ratio of 1.41). For the Life

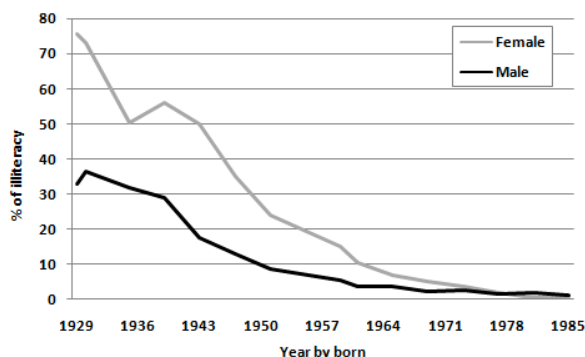


Figure 2. Percentage of illiteracy by gender and age.



Sciences, females present 55.8% of the total students enrolled in comparison with 44.2% left for the males (ratio of 1.26). For the General Sciences, males present 72% of the total students enrolled in comparison with only 28% left for the females (ratio of 0.39). Reading the data should take into account, that the percentage of enrollment of the females is higher than the males in secondary level than the males. Hence, it is very acceptable for all the ratios of girls to boys to be above than 1. However, some large discrepancies in the numbers are totally due to social factors. According to a study prepared by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Institute for Women Policy Research (IWPR) with funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the main reason behind choosing the Baccalaureate degree study is the later choice of university degree. And most of all, this choice is directed by some patriarchal aims for the boys to become engineering or a doctor. On the other hand, the advice for the females tends always to take into consideration her marriage, her family and children. Teaching is always the most practical choice for a female career. And this will be proven later with the teacher gender divisions.

### Higher Education

In Lebanon both private and public universities, colleges and institutes are directed by the ministry of education and higher education. While the technical and vocational institutes are dependent of the directorate general of technical and vocational education, the universities are dependent of the directorate general of higher education (El Amine and Faour, 1998). The academic year starts usually in October and lasts till June, making a nine months annual system distributed among three semesters: Fall, spring and summer terms where English, French and Arabic are the languages of instruction (SU, 2015).

Depending on the university attended, after 3 to 5 years of study, this first stage leads to a bachelor degree or diploma. Beyond this, the second stage involves more specialized work and lasts from one to two years and leads to a master degree at the American University System or what is called "Maitrise" in scientific topics, "Magistaire", "Diplome d'Études Supérieures" or "Diplome d'Études approfondies". In Engineering, the minimum number years of study are five in order to obtain the "Diplome d'Ingenieur" or "Master Degree in Engineering". In medicine, the medical doctorate (MD) is awarded after seven years of study. When it comes to other health studies, dentistry is organized according to the Lebanese law with minimum of 5 years of study, the physiotherapy with 4 years, and the pharmacy with 5 years. At the third level of higher education, a Doctorate is awarded in English university systems after 3 years of research. The process involves writing a thesis and leads to a Doctorate in French speaking universities too. In Lebanon today, the majority of women and men under 25 share some common aspirations about their future studies and careers. The differences between the expectations are being narrowed and not highly significant anymore (SWMENA, 2013). By contrast, women are more vulnerable to pursue high studies in deeper enthusiasm than men in most cases. These facts are translated by the data of the SWMENA surveys. Among the women who were asked about their education level satisfaction, 43% were aiming for a graduate school degree, 31% for a college or university degree, 3% for an intermediary or secondary diploma and the 22% remaining are happy with they have already got. Lebanese women through these numbers are proving their unlimited potentials and high targets, especially in comparison with the male levels, that were considerably lower. 29% of the men were satisfied with their level, and only 36% were thinking of a higher education diploma (SWMENA, 2013).

In figure 3 is shown the evolution of the number of students enrolled in the universities and higher education institutions over the years according to the Center for Educational and Research Development). It is important to mention that these numbers include all the students in the university and not only the first year students coming out from the secondary schools. The increasing level of students from 10 440 to 192 522 in 13 years (An increase of 7 006 students per year on average) is a vital sign of the Lebanese academic level; however the enrollment levels are still considered low regarding the high quality of education, and this may be due to the limited availability of public institutions and unaffordability of high cost education in low income groups (Soueid, et al., 2014).



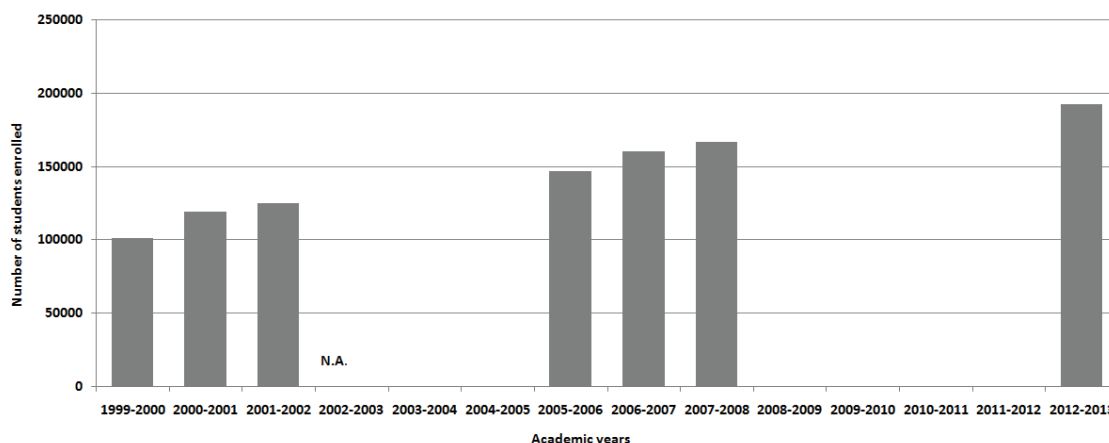


Figure 3. Evolution of the enrolment at higher education level. N.A.: No Available data.

Through four major missions that are the formation of human capital, the building of knowledge bases, the dissemination and use of knowledge, and the maintenance of knowledge, tertiary education contribute to social and economic development (Pouris and Inglesi-Lotz, 2014). Today, the total number of high education institutions encompasses 42 with the majority being legalized during the 1990's. Among the 42, there are 32 universities, 7 university colleges, and 3 university colleges for religious studies. They offer 160 programs, which lead to several qualifications. Most of them are located in Beirut and its neighborhood, with a total of 192 522 students where 86% of the students were Lebanese. Generally, most of these institutions require beside the Lebanese Baccalaureate, an entrance examination to test the student language competences and other fields of study. According to the preliminary statistics for the Academic year 2012-2013, submitted by the ministry of Education, the Center for Educational and Research Development, the Lebanese University, the only public university, holds the higher number of students with 73,698 students enrolled (38.28%), and then comes Beirut Arab University with 11 392 students, Saint Joseph University with 9 362 students, American University of Beirut with 7 826, the Holy Spirit University with 7 745 and the Lebanese American University with 6 320 students.

Furthermore, these numbers are investigated more according to genders in figure 4.

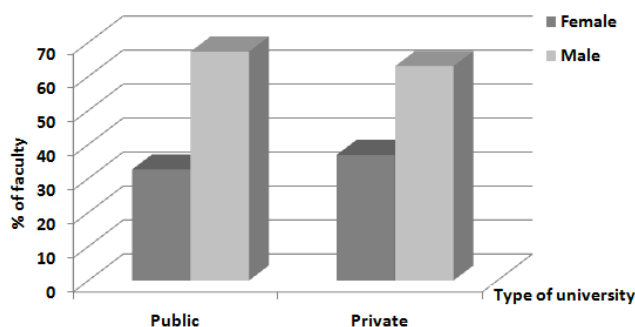


Figure 4. Distribution of graduates by gender and university type.

Comparing the level of graduates in higher education for both genders in the Lebanese university and in all other universities, two basic perceptions can be made. First, the percentages of female enrolled are higher in both public and private universities than the male percentages of enrollment. According to the Central of Educational Research and Development, the females in higher educational institutes count for 54% of the total of students enrolled, and the males only 46%. This gap may be due to the fact that it has become increasingly popular for the male students to enroll in technical high educational schools, to guarantee a sooner entrance to labor market. Second, the percentages of males and females are always higher in private universities, which are due to the lack of other public universities, and the high levels of corruption in the Lebanese University. Founded in 1951, the Lebanese University is the sole governmental university operating in Lebanon. The university witnessed a significant increase at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then the progress over the years was not remarkable enough due some political



disruptions in the internal university system. The main reasons behind this unsuccessful progress are the lack of a suitable learning environment, infrastructure, equipment, absence of clear regulation that facilitates the educational development. However, due to the limited financial resources, the Lebanese university is still holding approximately half of the total students enrolled in Lebanese higher education, distributed over the 17 different faculties distributed among the Lebanese regions (Soueid et al., 2014).

## Discussion

The gap between the public and private sectors in Lebanon is widened affecting a significant decrease in the number of public students. This gap is affecting the educational Lebanese sector, an essential contributor in the Lebanese economy, by paralyzing it to face the huge obstacles. Moreover, the educational system in Lebanon is lacking a healthy political, social and infrastructural environment to grow.

Referring to the famous Nelson Mandela statement that "Education is the great engine of personal development" (Butler-Adam, 2014), a vital strategy aiming the enhancement in the qualifications of the academic and administrative public staff is a must. Founding the education as a pillar contributor for development, Butler-Adam claimed that the National Development Plan's slogan of President Jacob Zouma is deeply worth to be "Our Education – Make it work" behind "Our Future – Make it work" (Butler-Adam, 2013).

The illiteracy levels are essential indicators of the educational level improvement in a country. Because the Arab world lacks academic publications on literacy and illiteracy, the UNDP reports may compensate this deficit (Hammoud, 2008). Comparing the literacy levels of Lebanon with some other neighbour countries gives a wider and realistic idea about the situation of Lebanon among other geographically closed countries, which helps in understanding some of the educational problems and contributes in finding the appropriate solutions. As stated by John Daniel, the former UNESCO Assistant Director General for Education, the Arab world has the world's lowest adult literacy rates (62.2%). According to database in (table 1) (WDB, 2014). Lebanon considered as belonging to the upper-middle income group is compared to the Syrian republic, the first neighbour of Lebanon belonging to the lower middle income group as per the World Data Bank, with Jordan another upper middle east country, Morocco a lower middle income ranked Arab country in the African continent, and Turkey a non Arabic upper middle income country of the Middle East. The five countries illustrate a good diversity in a small geographic distribution.

Table 1.

*Literacy percentages in Lebanon and other countries.*

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>Turkey</b>			87.4	88.2	88.1	88.7		90.8	92.7	94.1	94.9
<b>Morocco</b>			52.3				55.1	56.1		67.1	
<b>Jordan</b>		88.9		91.1		92.2			92.6	95.9	97.9
<b>Syria</b>	82.9	80.8								85.1	
<b>Lebanon</b>					89.6						
<b>Afghanistan</b>						31.7					
<b>Spain</b>				97.8		97.9	97.6	97.7	97.7	97.8	97.9
<b>China</b>									95.1		

Literacy rates in other countries such as Spain, an advanced Asian country China and very poor Asian country Afghanistan, serve for comparison too (table 1). An empirical investigation on inequalities of education opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa enlightens significant factors of this unequal achievement (Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2014). The results obtained for Lebanon are



challenging with consideration of all the instability and troubles surrounding its educational system. Lebanon's figures for literacy are somehow competent with those of the advanced countries and way better than its neighbour Syria or the African Arab country Morocco. This result confirms with Akar who stated that Lebanon uses the citizenship education as tool for social cohesion in its pos-conflict sectarian society (Akar, 2007). However, according to results obtained by Hammoud (2006) the literacy improvement increase in the Arab world is not considerably good with 1% each year which will take 39 years to eradicate illiteracy. A more interesting result is the large contribution of the women in the enrolment rates which has raised significantly the literacy percentages in the last years with no doubts.

These numbers are a veritable opening to the new horizons in Lebanon. A new perspective is surely being inaugurated. The feminine rush towards the education is destroying all the old traditions about the women staying at home and just taking care of her children. It is important to stop a while and think about the shadows of these numbers not only on the close future of the Lebanese society but also about the reasons behind these numbers. Looking beyond the newly statistics permits us to see that the educational system is emerging from the traditional society behavior. As stated by Metcalfe, there have been significant achievements in advancing women in leadership and political roles in the Middle East (Metcalfe, 2008) The regulations in Lebanon and the Arab world, maintain the right of the women to be educated and have equal opportunities with men. These constitutions were not being applied practically through the past years and the numbers offered by the ministry till years 2007-2008 are a great proof. However, during the last 5 years, figures have deviated much and witnessed a rise, especially with the new laws being into practice regarding increasing the contribution of the women in the workforce and stating their equity in duties and rights. The obtained data compared with data provided from SWEMNA surveys in Lebanon, has shown that young females are encouraged to break the traditionally known as male fields, but a slow change in the career plan makes always the interruption. The surveys has also shown, that most of the young women are interested in skillful careers such as armed forces, medicine not only teaching careers or cosmetology but need some resources to assist them in meeting their career goals. On the other hand, Metcalfe revealed that mobility restrictions placed on women limit their training and career choice options.

Studies published by the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) has illuminated on an uneven picture of the Lebanese case, where women are overcoming men in different levels of education from primary schools reaching universities, but the feminine labor workforce and political presentation are still very weak. The outcome figure of one woman out of 4 workers is a male is very disproportional. Distinguishing the rise of the number of females being enrolled in the higher educational institutions should also be accompanied with better focus on the faculties they are being enrolled in. The trade of enrolling in humanities faculties more than applied sciences or technology faculties is still accurate according to the numbers obtained from the Lebanese American University. The technical means being highly efficient in enhancing the world market, there is an urgent call to assist more women in technical trainings for them to be encouraged for more technical work. The general criteria for the women education in Lebanon might focus on educating the girl to help her getting simple, easy and comfortable jobs, which will not prevent her from having a family and raising her children. Metcalfe (2008) concluded that difficulties facing women are common in the world and those attributed to gender are culture constraints. However, all technical fields should be accessible to women, so that the feminine participation in the productivity will be a vital pillar for the economic development. Lebanese American University results prove that are being involved and highly competent, not to say overcoming the male skills in the various majors. Even in the engineering and medicine majors, that are still not encouraging enough for her, a woman is confirming herself as an equal person to the man.

## Conclusions

The main conclusions obtained after this study are the distinct level of illiteracy achieved by the Lebanese Educational System, and it's Excellency in providing bilingualism and multilinguism in many cases. The study reveals that the human Lebanese resources as the primal asset to be considered.





Lebanon, with its unlimited human resources properly built, has the chance to face all possible upcoming challenges and to make the best contributions in all different fields. Contrary to the judgmental social inequality in Lebanon, female percentages are fabulous in all educational levels. As a result of all the efforts seeking better social, scientific and technological advancement, the Lebanese women awareness towards education has risen gradually, making vital changes in the status of the women in the Lebanese society on all economical, vocational and legislative status and positive contribution for the region. Despite the Lebanese law calling for equality in citizenships and, practical life in the Lebanese society is tending to discriminate the women from reaching higher positions due to some patriarchal attitudes. Moreover, the progress of work on the feminine issue has been very minimal since 2006. In this age of continuous communicational development, the scope responsibility of the woman is to play her natural educational role in the advancement process to guide Lebanon as a multicultural country.

Finally, the Lebanese government and the Ministry of Education should recognize that Education is the key for a sustainable development of the Lebanese citizenship. Hence, developing the mankind should be the strategic approach to build the future of Lebanon based on a proper educational process. This can never be achieved unless with an equal educational opportunity basis and with an adequate collaboration between the public and private systems. A good place to start would be an essential, fruitful and collaborative work towards enhancing the public educational sector by spreading more quality schools in the Lebanese provinces rich with resources but lacking concern and opportunities. In the Bekaa, North and South of Lebanon, a wide promising generation that is not having the adequate chance for a healthy, equal and challenging educational system. The greatest way for a bright future of women is through enhancing the educational and cultural bridge between Lebanon and the rest of the world.

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