



Marsad
VAWP

Media and Gender Monitoring of the 2023 Municipal Elections

February Report

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

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Violence against women in the political sphere dominates the Lebanese spectrum, aiming to subject women to stereotypes and gender roles, restricting them from their political rights by adopting methods forcing them to suspend their participation in political activities and thus limiting women's from reaching decision-making positions.

This violence may take many forms that goes beyond physical abuse to include verbal abuse, psychological pressure, and economic violence, in addition to the prominent role of the media, particularly digital media, by focusing on conveying women's bodies, sexuality, and traditional social roles, in a society where women still suffer from marginalization in their political representation, access to the media, and actual recognition of their leadership role in managing public affairs.

The number of women registered on the electoral lists in the municipal and "Mukhtar" elections exceeded the number of men, whereby the percentage of women in the municipal elections in 2016 reached 50.8% of the voters, while the men registered was 49.2%.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, within the framework of the Lebanese Elections Support Project, included detailed information on women's participation in these elections at the levels of candidacy and winning, under the title "Women in Municipal Elections 2016."

The total number of candidates reached 21,932, including 1,508 women, or 6.9%, distributed over the following governorates: Beirut and the Bekaa (3,767, including 156 female candidates), Mount Lebanon (6,797 candidates, including 528 female candidates), South Lebanon and Nabatiyeh (5,460 among them). 300 female candidates), North Lebanon and Akkar (5908 candidates, including 524 female candidates).

The number of winning women candidates in the 2016 municipal elections reached 661, equivalent to 5.4%, which was considered a small percentage compared to the total number of 12,139 winners.



The Marsad VAWP Program, led by Maharat Foundation and Madanyat, and supported by the United Nations Women's Agency, seeks to monitor violence against women in politics, during the period extending to the 2023 municipal elections, to document and analyze the public discourse; To better understand violence against women in public life within the privacy and transparency of local elections, aiming on influencing the debate on women's participation in the political life as well as eliminating all kinds of discrimination and gender violence.

This first report was based on the methodology of listening groups within local communities through Listening groups and social listening sessions with women activists in the political field in Beirut (9 women activists), Saida (13 women activists), and Zouq Mosbeh (9 women activists). The participants filled out 29 questionnaires, as the relevant content was monitored. In addition, relevant content on social media was monitored to stay within the loop of the public discourse on women's participation in municipal elections and on any kind of violence within that context.

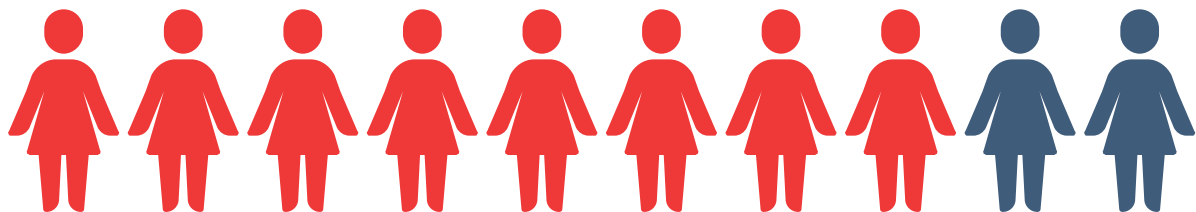
This report comes as a continuation of the monitoring and documentation carried out by Maharat and Madanyat during the last parliamentary elections in 2022, and documented through periodic reports the violence that female candidates were exposed to due to their political participation in public life.



87.4% of the 29 female participants, pro-active in the political field, including members of the municipal council, activists in civil society, employees in public affairs, and those wishing to run for the upcoming municipal elections, agreed that there is violence against women in the political field. The forms of violence against women in politics varied, between general social violence within the municipal council, economic violence, and digital violence. Yet the results shows the differences between violence against women and against men in the political field, due to the familial, political, ideological and financial obstacles that society enforce on women and makes them vulnerable to psychological and physical harassment and oppression from leading in administrative positions, as well as framing women in stereotypes within religious, ideological and partisan covers.

As in the event that a woman becomes a leader in public affairs, attempts still remain to limit her from making any decision.

Hence, the following results flag the importance of developing plans and policies that can reduce violence against women in politics, including civil society organizations encouraging women to participate in public affairs and political life.



87.4% Of the respondents agreed on the existence of violence against women in politics

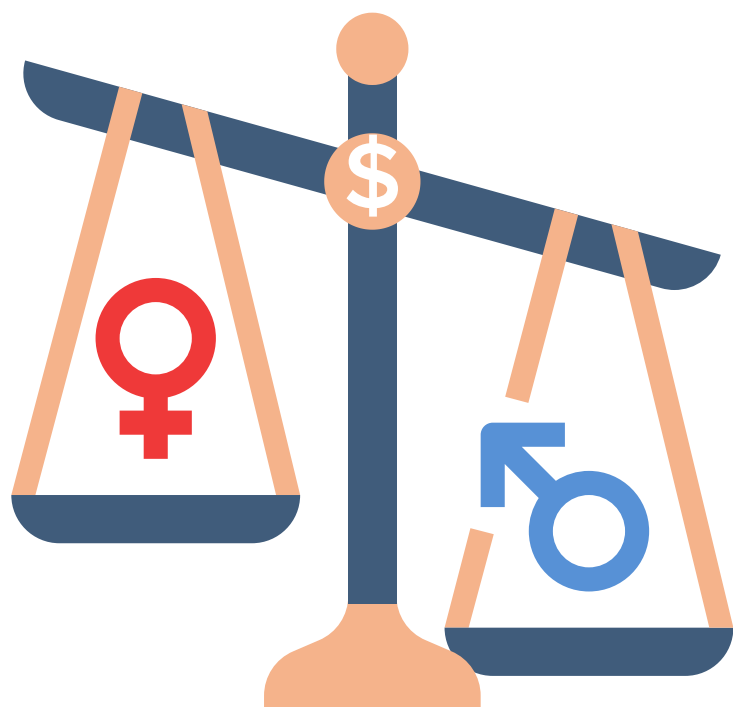
Chart 1



Violence takes an economic form due to the structural systems of gender inequality in the economic field. This violence existed before the exacerbation of the political and economic crises in Lebanon. According to the survey conducted in the three different regions, 34.2% of the respondents report that women are subjected to economic violence in the political field. According to the listening sessions, this type of violence is exercised and monitored within the municipality against women, since it is difficult for a woman, active in the municipal field, to claim funding for a local development project, after presenting it to other members of the municipality, even if it falls within the public and region's interests.

In fact, women are excluded from any position to lead financial or accounting tasks, such as the Finance Committee, or the Specialized Public Works Committee, only because she is a woman, while limiting her duties to social committees, such as: the Women's Committee.

In addition, women may be reluctant to participate in the political field due to their weak financial capabilities and the lack of financial independence that would allow them to finance their electoral campaign and engage in political activity.



Social violence against women prevails in the political sphere throughout Lebanese villages and towns, in which women sought to break the silence and set out to wage the political battle in the patriarchal society. The questionnaire showed that 61.9% of the respondents face social and family obstacles in the political sphere.

The family exerts pressure on women to withdraw from running in favor of men candidates, and 26.4% of the activists participating in the social listening groups indicated that they were threatened by family members because of their local public activity, highlighting one of the reasons for the low percentage of women candidates for municipal seats. In fact, one of the participants stated that :

A Violence practiced by people living in villages and rural areas, and the general public:



"In our region, there is no initiative from women to enter political life, because society did not allow women the opportunity to participate in it," while taking into consideration that the presence of a woman on the electoral lists may reduce the winning possibility of the list.



As shared by a participant during dedicated discussions

In addition, the participation of women candidates is used by political and electoral lists as “means” to win the votes of the supporting groups, and as a method adopted to influence public opinion by the presence of women on the list while disregarding their skills, competences and capabilities, aiming to oppress their role in decision-making on later stages.



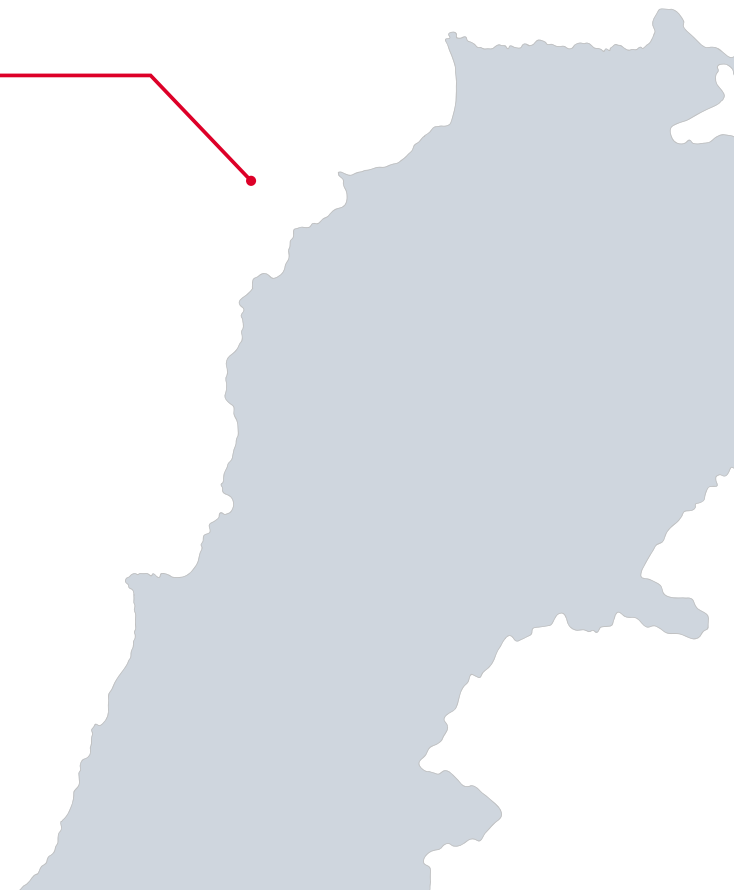
B Violence within the municipality

The elected female members are exposed to patriarchal practices that are classified under the category of systematic psychological and social violence in order to limit the ability of the elected women to play their roles, as reported by 61.4% of the participants in the social listening sessions.

Social violence within the municipality manifests itself in a different way through the marginalization of the role of women and not involving them in decision-making nor expressing their opinion, or by holding meetings at times that do not suit their social status, or by excluding them from certain tasks in areas that are still monopolized and dominated by males actors, such as public works and general procurement processes.

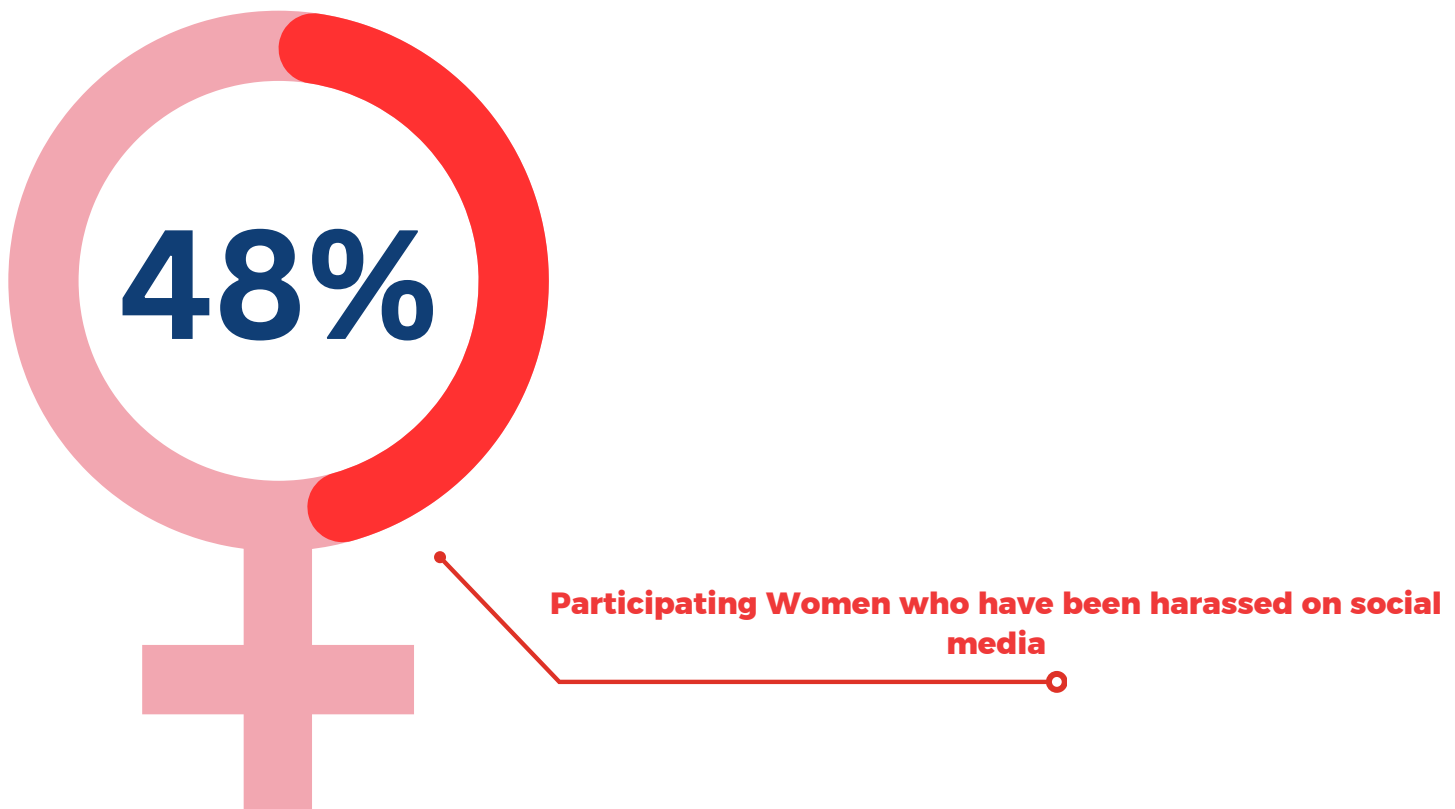
These practices aim to put pressure on women, force them to abandon their projects, and limit their political ambitions.

As per the survey, 22.9% of the respondents in the three targeted regions reported that they were subject to discrimination and were treated in a degrading manner by their colleagues within the municipal councils. In that context, a participants from Saida reported that a female colleague had resigned as she was facing exclusion from decisions-making processes within the municipal council.



In a digitalized space, where social media platforms have become important vehicles of communication, cyberbullying and unethical behaviour contributed to increased violence against women in politics.

In fact, the survey's results highlighted that 48% of the women activists in the political field, in the three regions, had been subjected to harassment on social media, and 3% had permanently closed their accounts. This harassment included: insults, theft of their electronic accounts, harassment of female candidates and activists in the political field, or complimenting them through using stereotypes on posts through which they present their electoral and political activities, this in turn may harm their political journey and entering into politics.



Some Lebanese regions are still witnessing women being restricted from participating in decision-making, and one of the activists stated that:



"Every religious figure practices religion differently, based on their own interests, resulting in further restriction of women's participation in the political field, knowing that religion in its general context did not prevent women from participating in decision-making."

As shared by a participant during dedicated discussions



Women in some regions may not be allowed to deliver political speeches in front of men, to sit with them nor to conduct dialogues.



Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights affirms that "no one may be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to any unlawful attacks on his honor or reputation." However, the Lebanese society finds it easy to criticize women active in the political field by interfering in their personal lives, and they are defiantly challenged by harming their honor and spreading rumors affecting their reputation, considering that

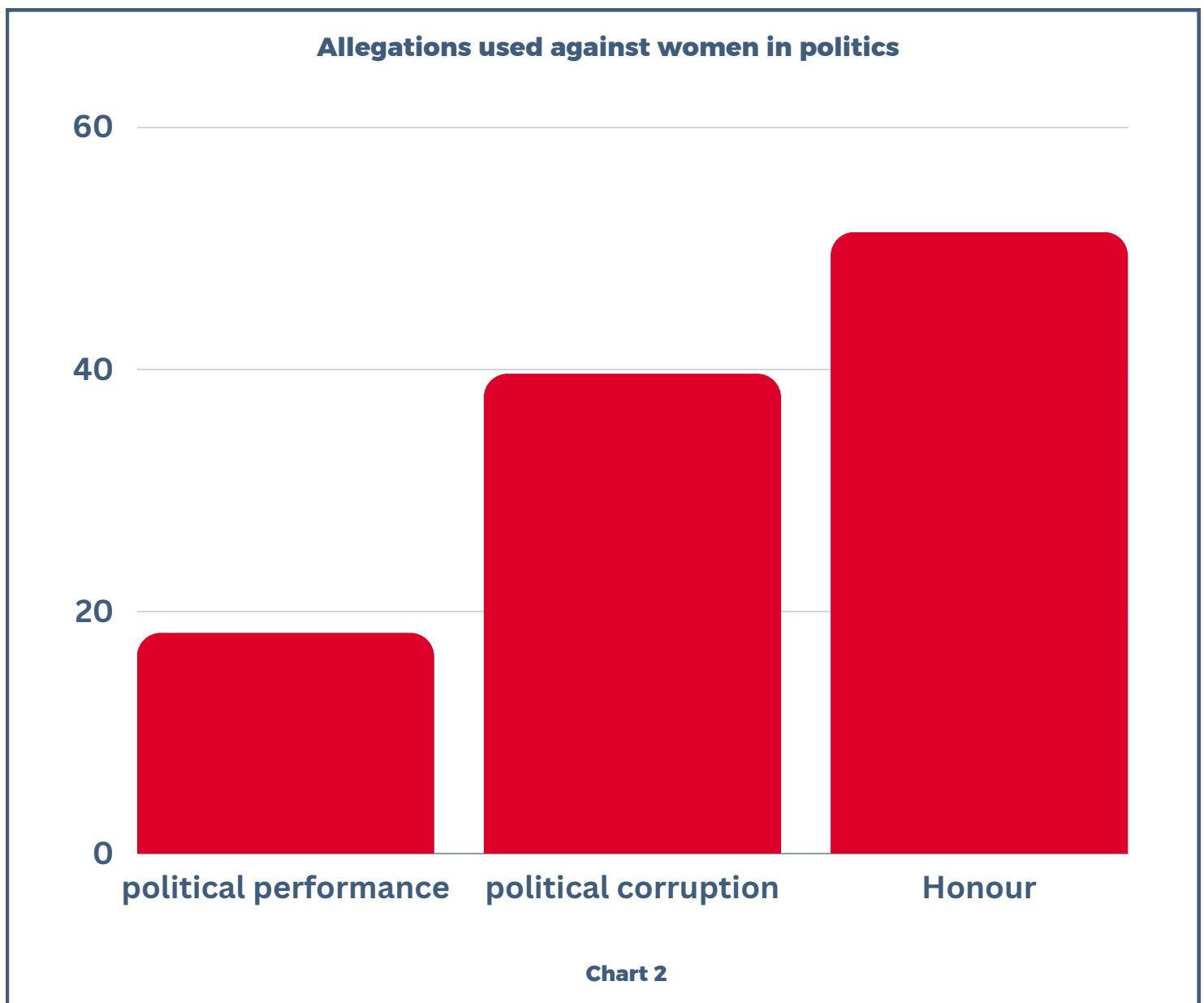
**"a woman's honor is part of the family's honor,
while a man has nothing to be judge upon".**

Based on the outcome of the survey, respondents report that women are 66.2% more likely to be subject to personal harassment by men, compared to 49.3% likely to be subject to harassment by women.



According to the survey conducted in Saida and Zouk Mosbeh, the respondents identified three themes categorizing the most prominent and violent allegations that women are exposed to in the political field: “Allegations related to honour, political performance, and to political corruption.”

The results of the survey showed that 51.3% of the respondents pointed out that those allegations are related to honor, 39.6% to political performance, and 18.2% to the allegations that fall within the political corruption theme.



Political parties play an additional role in supporting women to enter political life. However, for a women to become a member of the municipal councils, she primarily needs her family's support, as the municipal elections are based on families affiliation rather than a political one. And in case of a woman losing her family's backup, she loses partisan support in her municipal battle.

According to the law that will be adopted in the 2023 municipal elections, winning municipal seats will be based on the old electoral law (the majority law) on which the 2016 municipal elections were held, hence leaving women to face additional barriers whether in running as an independent candidate or to make it to a party's list, due to the current lack of a gender quota in legislative bodies nor within the parties.

In both cases, women candidates are subject to the party will, as it was found that 30.7% of the respondents reported that women may face partisan barriers within the political field, specifically in the parties' preferences to support men candidates over women candidates.



Many civil society organizations are extensively working to address the perpetuation of male succession to leadership positions, in terms of promoting public and individual freedoms, protecting women's right to work in the political field, and limiting violence against them, noting that most of the activists in the political field are not familiar with mechanisms to counter violence against women.

In the political sphere as indicated within the questionnaire, the results showed that 57.1% of the women participants had not heard of any official methods of reporting complaints in the municipal councils, and 33.8% were aware of the methods to report on any violence cases. Therefore, the participants unanimously agreed on the importance of training women to confront violence directed against them in politics. Adding to that the documentation of violence cases, as Maharat and Madanyat did in previous reports on violence against women in the political field, as it continues the process in the current reports.

Formal reporting methods for complaints in municipal councils

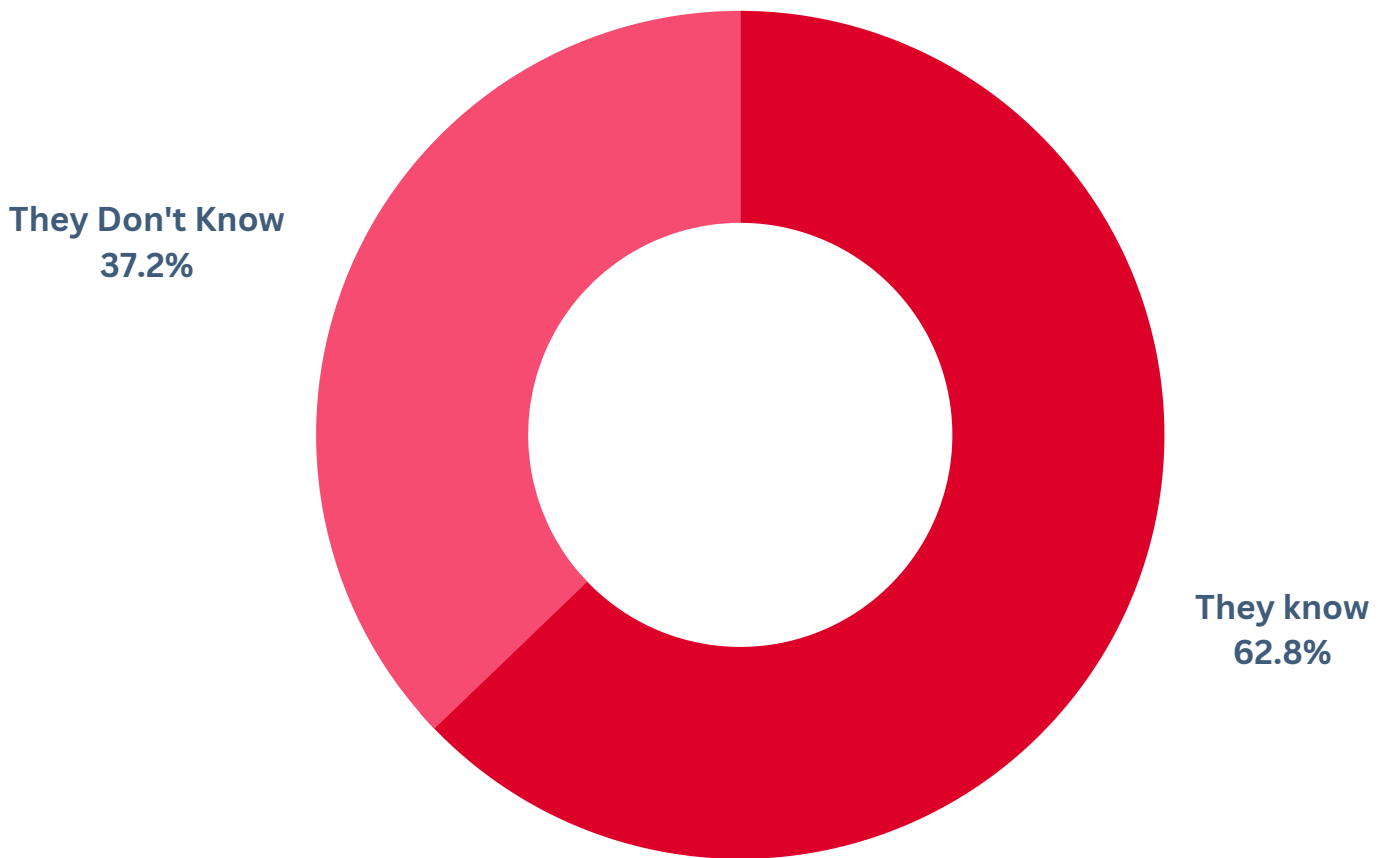
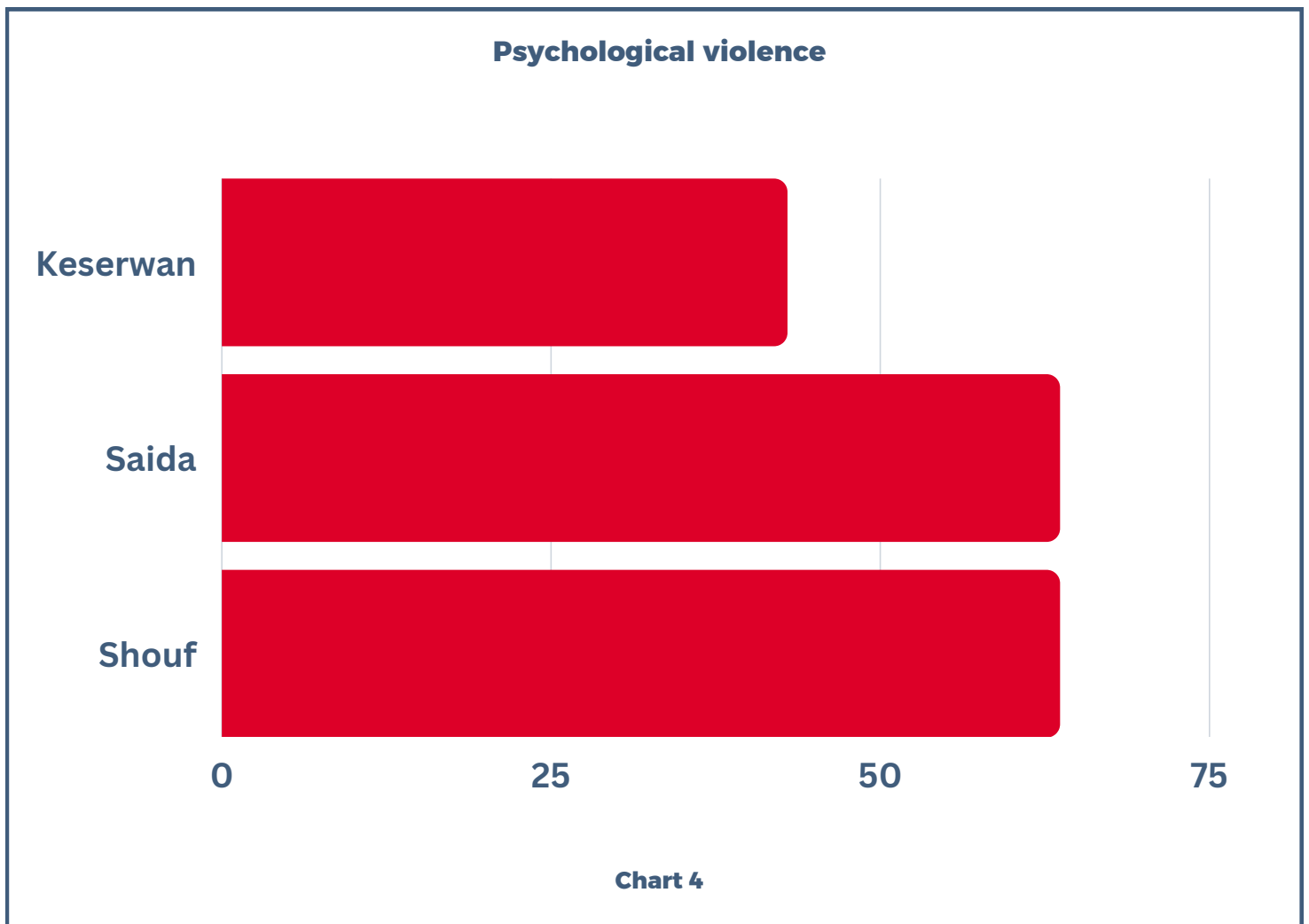


Chart 3



Tolerance of women’s activity in municipal work differs from accepting their presence in parliamentary work, due to the different ideological nature of each Lebanese village according to its culture and traditions. As examples, it was found that 63.6% of the female participants in the Chouf and Saida regions as well as 42.9% whom are located in Keserwan and the neighboring area, are exposed to psychological violence, starting from satisfying her family in her duties within the municipal council, proving her leadership role without being judged by the public, to intimidating them into questioning their self-confidence, by describing them as emotional rather than assertive.



Therefore, we see women making extra effort than men to reach administrative positions, in addition to fighting this mentality by forming a supportive environment, starting with the new generation that accepts openness and refuses to place any kinds of restrictions on women.

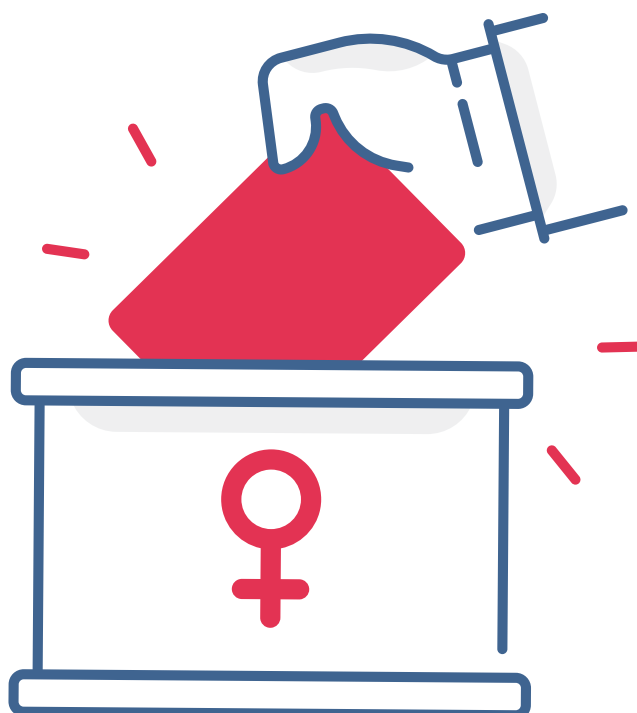


A woman should un-justify her rights



As shared by a participant during dedicated discussions

And activists have praised the importance of family support, and the husband's assistance to mitigate the impact of the personal harassment.



- 
- **Where is the man of the family**
 - **Do not run for elections**
 - **The flowers of the list**
- 

As shared by participants during dedicated discussions

Common misconceptions:

“Women are the enemy of women”

Activists participating in the dialogue sessions recounted the existence of personal harassment: The results showed that the harassment rate was higher coming from men, at 66.2%, than women, at a rate of 49.3%. Participants attribute the causes of harassment to a woman's jealousy of another woman, and growing up in a society believing in the saying that "a woman is the enemy of woman", without any validation towards that statement.

However, it is worth mentioning that enmity may exist between the sexes or between members of the same sex, however is it reasonable to say that a woman is an enemy of a woman, if she does not support her in the electoral campaigns, while a man is not said to be the enemy of the other man, even if he supported a woman in elections?

On the other hand, most of the activists participating in the listening groups stated that men, regardless of their characteristics in women's lives, are more likely to perpetrate violence against women in the political field.

The three listening groups denied the validity of this statement, due to the interactive and solidarity atmosphere among the participants, as the activists proved that this is nothing but a patriarchal statement to create a kind of violence based on incompatibility and competition between members of the same sex.



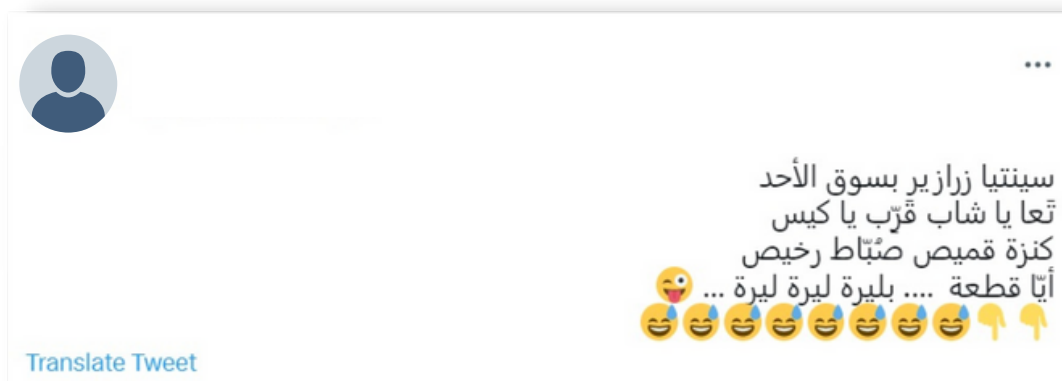
The public discourse regarding the upcoming municipal elections is still considerably shy on social media, due to the lack of certainty that the elections will be held on time. However, violence against women in politics is still present on social media platforms, even outside of the municipal context, as it was shown in some posts on "Twitter" a portrayal of the patriarchal nature of society in the practice of violence against women in the political sphere. Recently, violence against MP Najat Aoun Saliba emerged during her sit-in with MP Melhem Khalaf in Parliament.

case review:



THE MOST PROMINENT SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS:

The participants during the social listenings, including activists within the political field, dealt with what happened with MP Cynthia Zarazir, after she was criticized for not respecting the dress code in official meetings, as well as criticism during her chanting in front of the Parliament, and others in light of her unwillingness to communicate with the speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri.



Violence against women in politics did not deter women from continuing to try to impose their competence and leading role in public affairs. In fact, the results showed that 45.9% of women who participated in the questionnaire would run for the next municipal elections, if they take place, and 38.9% reviewed the possibility of their candidacy. However, the recommendations remain helpful in mitigating the impact of violence against women in the political field, whereby the most important of which are the following:

- Women should exert personal effort to engage in public affairs with a supportive environment that helps them reach leadership positions, and reduce society's view of “the supportive man”, on the grounds that the woman is the one who controls him, as one of the activists stated that,



"When the people of the region needed something, they used to turn to my uncle or my father, and now they turn to me, because I imposed my presence and role in public affairs."

As shared by a participant during dedicated discussions

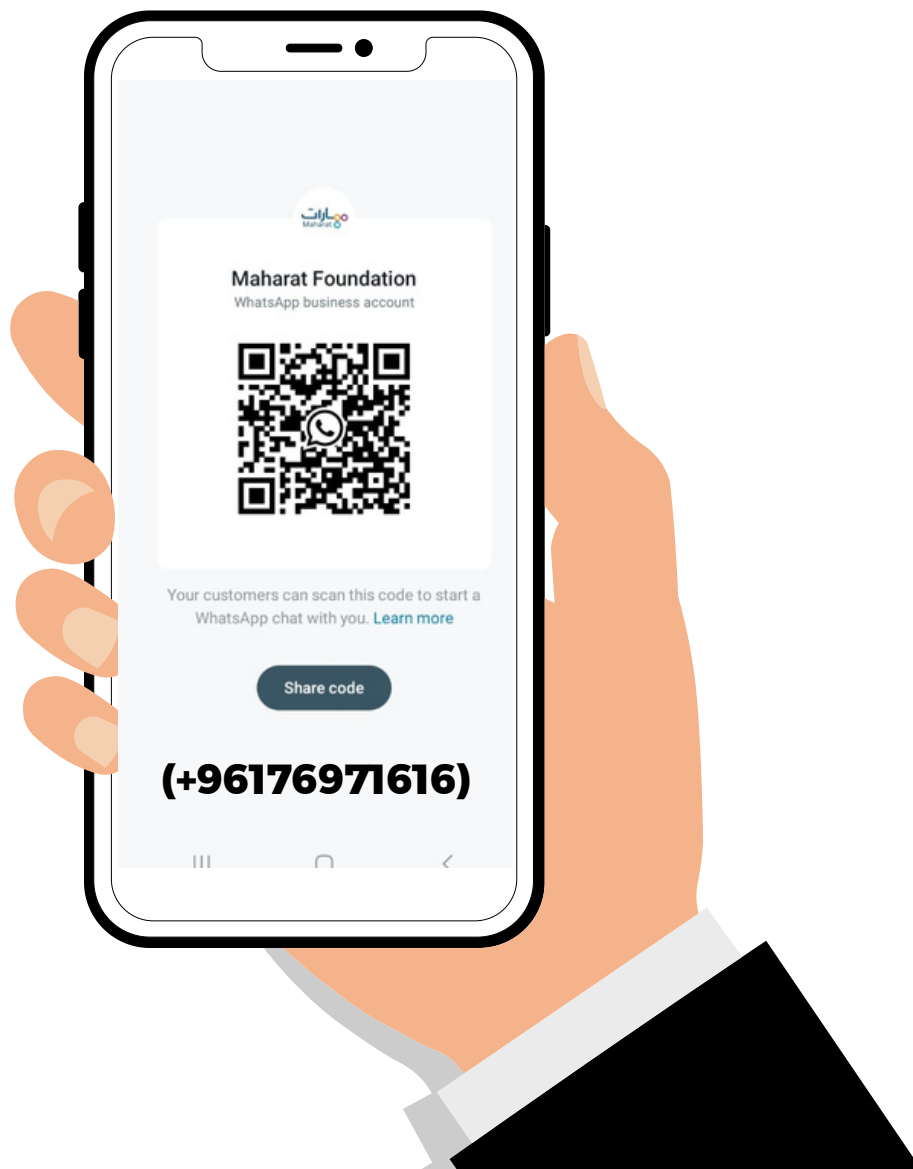


- Civil society organizations must hold training courses for women on the right to engage in political activity, and other courses for women and men to exchange views on equality between women and men in the political field.
- Agreeing to put in place mechanisms to reduce violence within the municipal councils, which may be in the form of signing pledges, setting up an accountability committee within the municipality, or establishing a body to receive complaints composed of members in the event that women and others are subjected to any kind of abuse/violence.
- Helping women activists in the political field to use social media for the benefit of their electoral campaigns.
- Improving the information ecosystem through developing policies that limit violence against women in the political sphere on social media platforms.



Within the framework of monitoring and documenting violence against women in politics and in order to activate the “Marsad VAWP” project, Maharat Foundation and Madanyat launch an initiative to support female activists in the public sphere who are subjected to violence through social media by setting up a hotline (+96176971616), through which activists can report on digital content that includes any kind of violence.

Maharat will work through its partnership with Meta, owning the Meta websites (formerly Facebook), WhatsApp and Instagram, using the direct reporting methods provided by this partnership for each content that opposes the community policies of these platforms. In addition, Maharat will also work within its partners to urge social media companies to respect and implement their policies to what women activists are exposed to, as indicated within the results of the periodic monitoring of the Marsad VAWP program.





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