

The Uphill Battle with a Boulder

*An analysis of factors restricting the impact of
non-governmental organisations advocating gender equality in
Lebanon*

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1. Introduction

“Much has been said about the role of the civil society and the missions it can carry out to help the State rise and to drive it on the path of reform and progress. I [...] call on the people of culture, science and enlightened thought, as well as on all the living forces of Lebanon, workers, peasants, employees, syndicates, professional and popular organizations, to unify their ranks and potentials, and work on imposing themselves as a respected and influential force”.

(Michel Sleiman, former President of the Republic of Lebanon, address at the end of his presidential tenure, 24 May 2014)

Lebanon was long known to balance on the constant brink of chaos. Since the end of the disastrous Civil War which lasted 15 years and has left large parts of the small country in ruins, Lebanon has struggled for decades to regain its former status as one of the most prosperous, diverse and libertarian states in the Middle East. And in fact, it has come a long way: peace has been made, roads have been rebuilt, the economy has been thriving for years, censorship has been reduced and today, a new generation of educated and ambitious Muslims and Christians are again able to live next to each other, working on a joint future.

In this time of reconstruction, civil society has seen an impressive development as well. From its task of providing for basic means of life during the Civil War, it has developed into one of the most diverse and large civil societies within region and is today widely regarded as the beacon of hope in the Arab world. So, although this raises expectations of civil society being the “influential force” Michel Sleiman named in his address, the contrary can be observed in reality.

An egregious example is provided in the matter of gender equality. The feminist movement has a long tradition in Lebanon with countless initiatives and groups today advocating women’s - and even LGBTQ - rights. At the same time, Lebanon is deemed to have one of the highest levels of gender inequality in the world, discriminating women and others on multiple levels. Apparently, factors exist in Lebanon that prevent civil society from taking effective influence on politics. So, what are those factors and how do they restrict civil society?

By way of the example of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaging in that topic, I want to analyze those possible factors of restriction. I have identified both an internal and external level of restriction I want to analyze and compare. Based on the scholarly work which has been conducted on this topic, I state the thesis that the impact of NGOs is primarily restricted by factors which are not a direct part of their work, hence external factors. Therefore, I conducted five expert interviews which are analyzed and interpreted qualitatively in this work.

Roughly, this work consists of a theoretical part which is followed by an empirical one. Firstly, I want to define the basic concepts of this work, such as civil society and NGOs. Then I develop the fundamental problem by contrasting the evolvement of (feminist) civil society on the one hand, and the level of gender inequality on the other hand, in Lebanon. In the third and final section of the theoretical part, I give a detailed overview of the obstacles for civil society which academic literature has identified and thereafter deduct my thesis from it.

The second part begins by explaining the qualitative social research methods I used for my empirical work. Then I show how the tool of intensity analysis is used in order to structure and code the material I collected. Lastly, I compare and interpret the empirical material in relation to the literature and derive conclusions concerning the thesis I stated beforehand. A summary of my findings constitutes the final section of this work.

2. The Restrictions of NGOs Advocating Gender Equality in Lebanon

2.1 Civil Society, NGOs and the Struggle for Gender Equality

Civil society, like so many other subjects concerning the social sciences, has proven to be an elusive term. Until today, the concept is used rather intuitively more than based on a homogenous basis of theoretical framework. This offers us today a "broad array of alternatives" (Jensen 2011: 26) when it comes to employing the term – a fact that can both be a chance as much as a pitfall concerning research in this field.

Since this work is not capable of analyzing and comparing all of the existing definitions, I want to base the term on the definition developed by CIVICUS, which defines it as

"[t]he arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market – which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests." (Mati et al. 2010: 16)

This definition goes hand in hand with a variety of authors and offers quite a precise tool to use such a "multi-layered" (Perez-Díaz 2014: 812) term in a precise manner. By using the spatial metaphor of an 'arena', this definition stresses the importance of public space as a field of contestation and processes of negotiation between different actors. It occupies a space in between the pure profit motives of the market on the one side, and the power monopoly of the state on the other side. (Albrecht 2006; Kollmorgen et al. 2015) Here, it can be clearly differentiated from the social 'family' space which covers a similar position however is defined by the absence of public negotiation and thus is defined by its private nature. (Mati et al. 2010: 17) Civil society has occasionally been dubbed the 'third' or 'non-profit sector' in order to "describe all aspects of society that extend beyond the realm of the public and the private sectors." (Yaziji & Doh 2009: 3)

Many authors have defined civil society as a mediator between those actors. It can function as a mechanism "to balance the power of the state and to protect individuals from the state's power" (Fukuyama 2001: 11), thus serving as a safeguard of both societal and private space in between politics and economy. (Albrecht 2006; Kollmorgen et al. 2015) While these aspects certainly form a crucial part of civil society, the definition applied in this work puts an emphasis on the advancement of

interests and "the promotion of values, needs, identities, norms and other aspirations" (Mati et al. 2010: 18) towards state and economy.

Because of this mediating power and the influence it may yield for the advancement of citizens' interests, civil society is widely seen as a precondition for modern liberal democracies. (Berman 1997; Carothers & Barndt 1999; Fukuyama 2001) But civil society leads "not only to more democratic and participative societies, but also to more just and freer societies" (Reverter-Bañón 2006: 9) - and this is what makes civil society a crucial part of the analysis when examining the feminist movement. Following the "theoretical connection between democracy and equality" (Beer 2009: 212) many scholars today recognize "the importance of the concept of civil society and its significant role in the promotion of gender equality." (Reverter-Bañón 2006: 8) Civil society has long been a central arena of the feminist struggle and is viewed as a site "not only of strategic opportunity, but also of liberation" by feminists. (Reverter-Bañón 2006: 9)

Concerning the fight for gender-equality and civil society as a whole, a multitude of actors has evolved over time. However, since the 1990s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped into the focus of political scientists (Akkaya 2012; Frantz 2014). Since then, a broad spectrum of definitions has been developed. Several characteristics are widely accepted, and are summed up by the definition of Hudson and Bielefeld:

"These organizations (1) provide "useful" (in some specified legal sense) goods or services, thereby serving a specified public purpose or weal; (2) are not allowed to distribute profits to persons in their individual capacities; (3) are voluntary in the sense that they are created, maintained, and terminated based on voluntary decision and initiative by members or a board; and (4) exhibit value rationality, often based on strong ideological components." (Hudson & Bielefeld 1997: 32)

Showing outstanding growth in number and impact (Frantz 2014), some scholars even seem to identify an "NGOisation" of development" (Banks et al. 2015). NGOs today can be regarded as one of the most important actors within civil society, making them a more than substantial choice for an analysis of civil society as a whole.

2.2 The Failing Struggle of Feminist Activism in Lebanon

2.2.1 A Lebanese History of Feminism and Civil Society

Civil society's struggle for gender equality has been persisting for decades all over the world. Its history in Lebanon tells an exceptional story within the region.

Feminist activism has been part of Lebanese civil society since its genesis together with the Lebanese nation state in 1923. (Stephan 2014; Civil Society Facility South 2015) With feminism being an elite movement since the beginning, civil society has maintained its affiliation with sectarian groups throughout the decades, and only started to become more detached from religion after the 1950s. (Civil Society Facility South 2015) During the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990, civil society naturally started focusing on covering humanitarian needs but swiftly regained strength afterwards.

Especially a series of mass protests emerging after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri which led to the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2005, called the Cedar Revolution, was commonly seen as a form of feminist liberation due to the big political participation of women in the events. (Stephan 2014). In this era which has repercussions until today, "the rhetoric of global and multicultural feminisms seemed especially salient" (Stephan 2014): feminists saw the chance to occupy space in the unstable situation in Lebanon and the region. A multitude of new organizations emerged.

Ever since, civil society in general and feminist activist groups specifically have experienced rapid growth: in 2014, there was a total of 8.311 associations officially registered with the Ministry of Interior. (Civil Society Facility South 2015: 36). Women are one of the top priorities for many of them: around 2 in 5 organizations state women as their primary beneficiaries, making them the biggest beneficiary group in total (Civil Society Facility South 2015).

Today, Lebanese civil society is certainly one of the most active in the Middle East, and feminist groups contribute an essential share to this movement. Organizations such as 'Meem' or 'Helem' which advocate for the liberation of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered in the Middle East are signposts for the exceptional status of queer-feminism in Lebanon – and up until now, they constitute the only openly queer organizations in the Arab speaking world.

2.2.2 On Gender (In)Equality in Post-War Lebanon

The fight for gender equality in Lebanon has been a fervent one for decades. So, what are the results of it?

The Global Gender Gap Index which is annually published by the World Economic Forum since 2006 measures inequality between the genders along economic, political, education and health criteria and is renowned as one of the most reliable indexes of its kind. (Bekhouche et al. 2014) In its 2014 edition, this index ranks Lebanon at the 135th place of 142 analyzed countries, making it the 8th most unequal country worldwide. And Lebanon has since its inclusion in the index clearly gone a negative path, making its way down from rank 116 in 2010 to today's position. (Bekhouche et al. 2014)

Although the constitution of Lebanon states that "[a]ll Lebanese shall be equal before the law" (Ch. 2, Art. 7), the contrary is the case. A complex system of patriarchally organized religious institutions including Muslim, Christian, Druze and Jewish religious courts lead to a jurisdiction systematically discriminating women in matters of marriage and personal status such as "legal and other obstacles when terminating unhappy or abusive marriages; limitations on their pecuniary rights; and the risk of losing their children if they remarry or when the so-called maternal custody period [...] ends." (Geagea et al. 2015: 1) Women in Lebanon, unlike the male share of the population, are not allowed to pass on their citizenship to their children. Children of a foreign father have no right to apply for Lebanese citizenship, take part in the political processes or leave the country without visas even though they were born in Lebanon to a Lebanese mother and lived their entire life in the country. (Nocharli 2013)

This marginalization of women in Lebanon due to patriarchal and discriminatory institutions spans into (and is a consequence of) political representation. In 2010, only 520 of the 11425 Lebanese municipalities were headed by women and since the last general elections in 2009, 4 of the 128 representatives in the parliament, or a mere 3.1%, identified as female. (Salameh 2014: 16f.) This is among the lowest share in a democracy worldwide, falling way behind the share of women in parliaments in countries such as Iraq or Tunisia. (Duncan 2009)

This unfolds the central problematic question of this work: if Lebanon has a vivid and strong civil society and a long tradition of feminist movements, "[t]hen why is the situation not so rosy?" as Angelina Eichhorst, Head of

the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon put it (2014). Why is civil society, and above all, why are NGOs in Lebanon not able to impact on gender equality? What restriction might they face that prevents them from taking impact? A question that is yet to be answered.

2.3 Obstacles for Civil Society: a General Review of Literature

2.3.1 Review of Internal Factors

The question which factors might be advantageous or harmful for civil society is not new to academia. The scholarly work that has been done so far covers various specific topics, mostly on specific regional and/or historic examples. Roughly however, the literature can be divided into works covering internal and external factors. This differentiation relates to “the reality that civil society, being created, can [...] be restricted by either its creators’ actions or by external forces” (Mati et al. 2010: 19) and is supposed to serve as a basic differentiation.

On the example of international NGOs collaborating with the United Nations, Schwenger showed that the internal structure of NGOs can be an important factor of analysis. (2013) Taking into account aspects of overall size, communication patterns, relations between departments, position of foreign units et cetera, he showed that the organizational structure might yield significant impact on the efficacy of their work. (Schwenger 2013: 200)

Some scholars identify the fact that NGOs are less member-based than other civil society organizations and often suffer from a “lack of membership, representation, and weak links to grassroots constituents” (Banks et al. 2015: 709) as a major restriction to both their legitimacy and influence. For Banks et al., it used to be one of NGOs’ “traditional strengths to build bridges between grassroots organizations and local and national-level structures” (2015: 707). However, grassroots engagement “remains incompatible with imperatives of organizational survival and growth in an aid architecture dominated by a heavy reliance on donor funding” (Banks et al. 2015: 710), leading to shifting relationships between NGOs, donors, the state and beneficiaries. Bano adds that NGOs, especially in developing countries, “rather than fostering horizontal networks and grassroots initiatives, [...] have contributed to the emergence of a vertical, institutionalized, and isolated civic community”, eventually eroding social capital, democratic traditions and diminishing the overall impact. (2008: 2298)

Funding plays another major role in assessing the impact of NGOs: “Nonprofit scholarship [...] suggests that



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economics, particularly access to adequate financing, serve as an additional constraint or opportunity facing NGOs.” (Bloodgood et al. 2014: 719) Many NGOs are largely dependent on national and international donors in order to secure their budgets and are often chosen above government or private actors for a number of reasons. (AbouAssi 2013) However, funding mostly is distributed with subsequent conditions resulting in “pressures [...] to be accountable ‘upward’ to donors rather than ‘downward’ to beneficiaries, and their focus on short-term projects rather than long-term structural change” (Banks et al. 2015: 709). When donors then revise their strategies for a country, NGOs often “lag behind in their plans, trying to figure out how to adapt to these developments.” (AbouAssi 2013: 585)

Scholars furthermore mention that the impact of NGOs might be restricted by the lack of cooperation. Collaboration among NGOs yields tremendous positive effects and generally “greatly increases the effectiveness of their work.” (Ferrari 2011: 88) As Scobie et al. show, cooperation enhances their “influence in debates and discussion and higher political standing and protection”, supports the “optimal use of both physical and human resources” as much as it fosters “complex problem solving, better coordination of activities, being more well-connected, a cohesive approach” and “shared responsibility”. (2013: 6f.) All those “synergistic effects from combining different strengths” (ibid.) disappear when collaboration within the NGO landscape does not work due to different reasons.

2.3.2 Academic Work on External Factors

The environment in which NGOs operate has been deemed central by many scholars:

“Even those studies that argue for the democracy-promoting role of NGOs highlight that this is dependent on an enabling environment. [...] Where these contexts and attributes are not present, studies find the opposite: in many cases NGOs have struggled to promote democratic outcomes through their activities.” (Banks et al. 2015: 711)

This 'enabling environment' constitutes a variety of actors. Firstly, scholars such as Reverter-Bañón made clear that "[c]ivil society has no meaning unless it is conceived of in relation to the state." (2006: 9) The 'state' as a complimentary partner plays an essential role, and its functioning is set as a precondition for the effective work of NGOs since "[t]he pressure of civil society [...] can only play its role if the state enjoys sufficient capacity to respond." (Reverter-Bañón 2006: 11) Beyond that, Bloodgood et al. make clear that "[r]egulations shape actors' behaviors by permitting, prescribing, or prohibiting specific categories of actions" and more explicitly "that macropolitical opportunity structures as reflected in national regulations matter for all NGOs because they shape the context in which NGOs exist and operate." (2014: 718) So it is not only a functioning political structure that matters, but in the same way laws being the main regulatory institutions the state provides for NGOs. If the state is adversary to their interests, serious restrictions to influence might be the consequence: "Where governments equate civil society with political opposition and create regulations to dampen or repress civil society, NGOs face severe limitations on their ability to act as agents of progressive social change." (Banks et al. 2015 711f.)

On a second level, research has shown that the economic environment is central to civil society. In a study on the impact of the financial crisis on civil society actors in the EU, it was shown that civil society organizations and NGOs are struck by economic change on the levels of funding, the vocalization of interests, their opportunities of interaction and their overall engagement. (Shahin et al. 2013) Especially smaller, local NGOs experience harsh cuts and face the threat of "[getting] lost in the cacophony of voices" (Shahin et al. 2013: 3). Additionally, scholars of post-communist countries have argued that "declining macroeconomic conditions of the region [...] have been the primary factors contributing to distrust in civic organizations and political institutions." (Zakaria 2013: 352) Trust is widely regarded as a substantial precondition for a thriving civil society (Bădescu et al. 2004) and with its role of reducing levels of trust among actors, "a lively culture of corruption" might as well be "a possible culprit in weakening civil society." (Zakaria 2013: 353)

On a third level, several authors argue that specific cultural structures, especially societal cleavages, might be factors which limit the impact of civil society organizations. In an article on civil society in the Greater Middle East, Roy states: "There is never a tabula rasa. Even in chaotic situations, there are networks, leaders, traditions and a memory of the past", and "[i]gnoring

that means [...] having to build from scratch an illusory civil society which exists only in the activity reports of the various NGOs and institutions." (Roy 2005) Civil society organizations seem to be shaped on the cultural framework they operate in. The same idea is shared by Bădescu. He explains the weak civil society in post-communist countries of Moldova and Romania can partly be explained by the historically founded distrust in organizations, and the way those former totalitarian regimes discouraged public participation. (2004) In this sense, history and culture matter, and have to be part of such an analysis.

2.3.3 Thesis for the Case of Lebanon

On a general level, the amount of academic work stating internal factors limiting civil society's impact is comparable to the one supporting external factors. However, regarding the case of Lebanon, most of the studies and scholars concentrate on external factors when it comes to explaining the weakness of civil society: The Civil Society Atlas, one of the most current and comprehensive analyses of Lebanese civil society, identifies three areas with the need of prioritized support: the legal framework, the socio-economic context and then situation of the Syrian refugee crisis, all external factors (2015). Other scholars highlight the negative impact of the sectarian system and religious divisions in Lebanon (Clark & Salloukh 2013) and the CIVICUS Country Report states: "The external environment of civil society in Lebanon is obstructive, marking the weakest score of the four dimensions" (AbouAssi 2006)

Thus for this case, I want to state the thesis that *the impact of NGOs advocating gender equality in Lebanon is primarily restricted by external factors.*

2.4 Methodology

Research Design and Material

In order to test my thesis that feminist NGOs in Lebanon are primarily restricted by external factors, I use qualitative empirical research methods. By conducting systematizing expert interviews, I tried to fill the gaps in my knowledge in a comprehensive and structured way. (Bogner et al. 2014)

As an analytic framework from which I wanted to derive a survey, I decided to employ the Civil Society Index (CSI). This index encompasses a huge variety of different indicators which made it necessary to discuss the literature on this topic first in order to identify the points that are relevant for this research and be able to draw conclusions.

The CSI was developed by CIVICUS, a self-described “world alliance for citizen participation”. It was conducted for the first time in 1999 and aims to “reach an evidence-based understanding of civil society, such as its strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities”. (Mati et al. 2010: 8) Since a major redesign in 2008, the Index encompasses 2 general levels of analysis, an internal and an external one, which I want to compare. The internal level of analysis consists of 4 dimensions: civic engagement, level of organization, practice of values and perceived impact while the environmental context is one-dimensional. Altogether they are sub-divided into 24 sub-dimensions, which are themselves composed of various indicators, altogether being constructed around the ideas of relevance, measurability, unambiguity, the ability to cross-check and empowerment (Mati et al. 2010).

What Is Asked: Survey Creation

I decided to omit two of the internal sub-dimensions. Firstly, the practice of values, which was originally implemented to check on the progressiveness of values of civil society actors. This is controlled by the sample selection and thus is not part of the analysis. Secondly, this work is conducted under the premise that the impact of civil society is low, which renders an analysis of the fact or ‘perception of impact’ not very useful.

On the basis of the literature I reviewed and the expert interviews I held before conducting the first interviews, I reduced the 13 remaining internal sub-dimensions to 5 variables which I used in my empirical research, namely intensity and diversity of engagement, internal structure, human resources, financial resources and interconnectedness. Similarly, I included sub-indicators of the 3 external sub-dimensions and derived 5 variables

I tested empirically, economic situation, corruption, political situation, legal framework and cultural environment.

The survey begins with a short introduction explaining my research projects and includes two preliminary questions which are not part of the empirical analysis.

Who Is Asked: Sample and Field Access

From the population of all civil society organizations in Lebanon, I contacted those who were not established by state actors, thus ‘non-governmental’, and characterized as advocacy organizations rather than mainly service providing ones¹.

Due to safety, financial and time restrictions, I could only include NGOs in my sample which are based in Beirut and the immediate surroundings. Also due to my lack of proficiency of Arabic, I only included organizations which offered an English or French website and a contact person capable of one of the two languages. Other than that, no systematic exclusions from the sample have been made concerning the status of the interviewee within the organisation, his or her work experience, background or gender.

Accessing the field of gender promoting non-governmental organizations seemed surprisingly tricky in the beginning. Problems could be observed due to the overall problematics of Lebanese everyday life (such as power cuts, internet cuts, lacking addresses etc.), language barriers, and the researcher’s social status as a student which is a specific one in Lebanon. However, with the support of Heinrich Böll Foundation Middle East where I was working as an intern at the time, I ultimately got into contact with a variety of organizations. In total, I talked to 5 interviewees of different positions, ages and genders.

How It Is Asked: Survey Collection

The survey collection itself was conducted along the ‘interview guide’ approach. This means that topic areas were pre-specified but wording order and the order of questions may change depending on the situation. (Halcomb & Davidson 2006) Beyond that, additional questions were added in the interview whenever I had the impression a question was not or only partly understood, or the interviewee had more to share on the topic. This leaves more space to adapt to the different kinds of personalities and situations a researcher

¹ - Here, Yaziji and Doh offer an approach that states that NGOs “can be broadly divided along two dimensions – (a) whom the NGO is designed to benefit and (b) what the NGO does”. (2009: 5) Along with these binary categories for both characteristics, advocacy is defined as to “give voice and provide access to institutions to promote social gain”.



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encounters in qualitative research.

More than the role of a critic or a co-expert, I chose to adopt the role of a 'lay in accomplice' person in the interviews. (Bogner et al. 2014: 52f.) The fact that I got in contact with some of the interviewees via common colleagues and friends implied that there is a common denominator and I wanted to use this trust to reveal more information.

All interviews were conducted face to face and in the location of the interviewees' choice, mostly the respective offices of the organizations. The interviews lasted between 21:04 min and 31:32, with an average duration of about 25 min. All interviews were conducted in English.

And How to Write It Down: Transcription Rules

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in accordance with the interviewees.

I hereby used a denaturalized approach. This approach primarily concentrates on the informational content of the speech and revolves less around involuntary intonations and accents: "accuracy concerns the substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation." (Oliver et al. 2005: 1277) Thus, I decided to omit incomplete words, fractured sentences and filling words; equally Non-verbal vocalizations, such as stuttering, pauses, breathing, gestures or laughing are not transcribed and I did not concentrate on a transcription of speaking styles, such as accents or slangs. In order to make the text more comprehensible, intonations are marked by bold font and grammar mistakes are corrected and marked in italics. Inaudible parts are marked with a time stamp inside the text. This approach admittedly leaves out some information which might be interesting, however it is not central for a content centered analysis as I want to pursue in this paper.

2.5 Analysis of Intensity

2.5.1 Formal Framework

In order to make sense out of the five qualitative expert interviews, it is essential to proceed in a structured and systematic manner. This work follows the structural form of an analysis of intensity (*Intensitätsanalyse*) as formulated by Phillip Mayring. Here, the researcher generally weighs the qualitative contents on a predefined scale in order to be able to compare intensities of (dis-) approval and thus conclude interpretations concerning the research question. (Mayring 2010: 15)

This method takes 9 steps. The first three steps encompass developing a research question (Chapter 1 and 2), defining the empirical material (Chapter 4) and stating the variables that are to be analyzed (Chapter 3). Now we are to create definitions for the categories of intensity which serve as the basis of the formal analysis. (Mayring 2010: 15) I decided to classify the information on an ordinal scale of three intensities:

1. **'Not restrictive'**: the factor is not deemed restricting by the interviewee. She or he does not refer to the variable as problematic for their impact. An explanation of how it is not problematic might be given. This category is coded with a 0.
2. **'Partly restrictive'**: the factor is deemed somewhat restricting by the interviewee. She or he does depict specific aspects of the variable as problematic however does not state it as a central problem for their work. This category is coded with a 1.
3. **'Restrictive'**: the interviewee is clear about the factor being problematic to the impact they pose. She or he explains the ways the variable restricts their work and leaves very little or no ambiguity. This category is coded with a 2.

2.5.2 Units of Analysis

In the next step, the three units of analysis have to be defined. (Mayring 2010: 15) Firstly, the unit of coding (*Kodiereinheit*), which defines the smallest component of text possibly applying to a category (Mayring 2010: 60), is set as any single sentence of this work's empirical material. Secondly, the unit of context (*Kontexteinheit*), which defines the biggest component of text possibly applying to a category (ibid.), may theoretically encompass an entire interview. Lastly, the unit of evaluation (*Auswertungseinheit*), which defines the order of the analyzed components, follows the order of categories as developed by the analytical framework of the Civil Society Index.

Table 1. Scores of Intensities of Conducted Interviews

Factor	ABAAD	CRTD.A	Women in Front	RDFL	Legal Agenda	Added Score
<i>INTERNAL</i>						
F1: Civic Engagement	1	1	1	2	0	5
F2: Internal structure	1	0	0	0	0	1
F3: Human Resources	0	2	1	0	1	4
F4: Financial Resources	2	2	0	0	1	5
F5: Interconnectedness	1	0	0	2	1	4
<i>EXTERNAL</i>						
F6: Econ. environment	1	1	2	1	0	5
F7: Level of Corruption	2	2	1	0	2	7
F8: Legal Framework	1	1	0	0	0	2
F9: Political environment	2	1	2	2	2	9
F10: Cult. environment	2	2	1	1	1	7
Internal	5	5	2	4	3	19
External	8	7	6	4	5	30
Overall	13	12	8	8	8	49

2.5.3 Coding of Intensities

In the next step we go to the empirical material and scale the units of evaluation in the categories developed in the previous chapter. Even though research tries to make this process more objective by requiring precise definitions of the categories, the classification lastly remains the subjective result of a naturally biased researcher.

Eventually the following table with an overview of scores could be compiled which enables us to compare the different values. **Table 1** serves as the basis for the interpretative analysis of the next chapter

2.6 Interpretation and Discussion

2.6.1 On Bosses, Colleagues and Volunteers

One of the factors that was deemed the least restraining by the NGOs was their internal structure. While through the factor of social desirability it could be expected that interviewees might avoid criticizing their own NGO, still some people revealed deficiencies in their organization's structure that might impact their work. In feminist NGOs, specific organizational principles might become relevant. Concerning hierarchy, ABAAD is "attempting as much as possible, based on feminist principles, to be more horizontal rather than hierarchical." (Anthony Keedi, ABAAD, personal interview, Beirut, 10 August 2015)² While horizontal ways of organizing do not state a problem per se, it might be more subject of adjustment than 'traditional' forms of organization: "we are in a constant process of re-analyzing, changing, re-analyzing, changing, making a mistake, apologizing for it, analyzing it, and changing it." (Keedi) However, this principle did not necessarily apply to the other NGOs - RDFL even pointed out their hierarchical structures as quite effective. (Eva Dbouk, RDFL, personal interview, Beirut, 26 August 2015) Thus the horizontal organization structures in feminist NGOs might require more resources than conventional, hierarchical structures – resources that can be used for projects or advocacy. But this was not seen as a major limitation for their work.

The availability of human resources can be regarded as another relevant -although not central- factor of restriction. Interviewees agreed on a situation in

2. after the first mentioning, this will be shortened to ((last name), [number])

Lebanon that is described by scholars as an “undervalued and over-educated supply of human capital”. (Nahas 2011: 90) So on the one hand, “all young people, they are educated and they have high level of education” (Dbouk) which is the result of a broad tertiary education system and one of the highest university enrollment ratios in the Arab region. (Nahas 2011) This situation leads to a broad supply “of fitting CVs [...] [e]specially from the early graduate and also people that don't really have a previous work experience” (Sarah Wansa, Legal Agenda, personal interview, Beirut, 27 August 2015) which might even be beneficent for the work of NGOs. However, on the other hand “salaries are not that good in the NGO field.” (Nada Saleh Anid, Women in Front, personal interview, Beirut, 14 August 2015) This especially started to pose a problem in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis:

“What has happened during the past two three years in Lebanon is that the Syrian crisis has created a new economy in the development sector. So young people, for instance, with very, I would say, limited experience can find highly paid jobs. [...] [S]o it has skewed the market which made those of us who do not work in humanitarian emergency situation way below the market. (...) And I think, many of us suffer from this.” (Lina Abou-Habib, CRTD.A, personal interview, 19 August 2015, Beirut)

This is a crucial aspect to be taken into account. If organizations struggle to find efficient workers, they won't be able to do effective work either.

Grassroots engagement and the mobilization of volunteers showed to be a problematic topic in Lebanon. Some NGOs stated that it is more difficult to have locals involved: “I have to say, most of our, if not all of our volunteers, have been foreigners. It's hard to find local volunteers.” (Abou-Habib) Eva Dbouk explains firstly that “[e]ven if they are college students they have to work and study, so they don't have time” and adds that many don't see a point in volunteering “because most of the Lebanese people don't believe in - how do I tell that - they don't believe in this political and social structure here.” (Dbouk) This lack of trust in the local constituency and its restrictions to form an active civil society landscape is a problematic development that can be dated back to Lebanon's history.

Furthermore, Banks et al. analyze how donor based funding structures discourage volunteering and de-link NGOs from their constituency coming to the conclusion

that “the current aid architecture prioritizes particular, tangible structures built around formal, professionalized organizations.” (Banks et al. 2015: 709) This phenomenon can be seen in the empirical data as well. Anthony Keedi from ABAAD states that including volunteers is a process which would consume a big share of resources provided by the donors:

“It is a project in it of itself but that requires salary that requires the time that requires office space, a computer. It's a job. And too many times we assume because volunteers are coming for free, that it should be free to organize it. And the truth is, that is not the case at all.”

This factor leads to a detachment between non-professional women and men wanting to get voluntarily involved in feminist actions and a quasi-elite NGO structure which itself is not able “to evolve structures that suit their [the constituency's, ed. note] concerns and contexts.” (Banks et al. 2015: 709)

2.6.2 Collaboration and Funding: Enemies Within?

My empirical analysis shows that the lack of collaboration among organizations is connected to the misallocation of financial resources and thus might pose substantial internal obstacles to feminist NGOs in Lebanon.

While interviewees from Women in Front and CRTD.A did not report any obstacles to working together, Sarah Wansa from Legal Agenda states that “there is a collaboration between NGOs but the collaboration is on specific issues, let's say, or events.” while in the opinion of Eva Dbouk clearly “a lack of cooperation and collaboration between groups of NGOs” can be observed. For her “they don't believe in teamwork” and hence, “there are certain NGOs that work honestly and support really your work and you can depend on them and others who you can't.” This atmosphere of distrust which might again be the result of decades of civil war, religious clashes and more recent crises is aggravated by the way funding is organized. Anthony Keedi stresses that collaboration is a major issue for many feminist NGO, however “even though we want to work together on the cause, we are competing against each other for who is going to be getting the money to work on the cause.” This phenomenon is common among specific NGO environments. Ferrari explains “that competing NGOs behave like any other organization, including for-profit ones, in a marketplace.” For her, “[c]ompetition for material resources can seriously detract from the

organization's focus on delivering its services" (2011: 88) and this, as my research suggests, is what might be happening in Lebanon.

Hence, collaboration is directly connected to the question of funding. Advocacy or services can only be applied if there are enough financial resources coming in. In Lebanon, it can be observed that problematically almost no funding whatsoever is coming from the Lebanese state. All interviewees stated that their funding is coming from international NGOs, foreign governments and embassies or the EU. Although "government funding is an unreliable—and possibly unattainable—source of revenue for many CSOs" (Sinek 2012: 112), and non-governmental funding reduces the upward accountability towards potentially influential political forces, it does exacerbate specific problems related to the Syrian civil war. This conflict and the accompanying refugee crisis have had tremendous impacts on Lebanese NGO funding. On the one hand, many donors who were engaged in Lebanon before split their available financial resources to redirect a substantial part to crisis-related action. This drastically reduced the amount being allocated in total. On the other hand, "when the crisis first happens, there is a lot of money to be given to whoever can work." (Keedi) However, this money does not support the existent local civil society or NGOs but "international aid money is being routed to the emergency" (Abou-Habib). NGOs engaging in gender-equality, being a long-term project, are often left out. This mechanism is one of the major constraints for making an impact not only on an ad-hoc basis but with sustainable, long-term influence:

"It's not just the financial resources, it's also the durability. It's very difficult to work from - it's very challenging to work from here to here. Unfortunately we are not able to have multi-year agreements. But regardless of the amount of money, a multi-year agreement means that you can plan better, you can focus on your work rather than on fundraising." (Abou-Habib)

This factor of sustainability was deemed central, and named "the main problem" (Saleh Anid) in various interviews. In the end, "[o]ur work doesn't mean anything unless it's sustainable." (Keedi)

2.6.3 How Economics and Corruption Weaken Civil Society

Having analyzed the internal factors, we now want to evaluate the external environment of NGOs in Lebanon. To begin with, the economic environment and the problem of corruption seem to essentially limit NGO

work.

In an official structure which fails to be "effectively working since the Civil War" and reproduces a "lack of employment, lack of education, lack of health services" (Dbouk), NGOs are affected on two levels: Firstly, it is connected to the funds available for NGOs. As I explained in the previous chapter, Lebanese feminist NGOs are largely independent from Lebanese government funding and thus from the national economy. However, developments such as the global financial crises naturally affect all donors, such as the German Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) being a big funder of projects, creating new levels of dependency:

"You know, for an instance, we've been strategic partners with HBF since HBF started here. But whatever happens with HBF's income, affects its partners as well. [...] I think, there are challenges related to the resources of our partners. (Abou-Habib)

More drastically for the case of NGOs in Lebanon with a focus on gender equality, economic changes affect a majority of their beneficiaries: women. In a grave economic environment, many women "have less and less ability of running for election." There are electoral fees, they have their own struggle for life, so they are less keen to work on political issues." (Saleh Anid) Women still bear the lion's share of economic deprivation, and for women, an economic downturn "exacerbates the impact of a particular inequality or oppression or denial of a right." (Abou-Habib) This takes away possibilities for them to get politically involved, or benefit from the advocacy provided by NGOs, consequently restricting the impact they are able to yield for gender equality. Interestingly, this result depicts the exact opposite of the findings by Shahin et al. during the financial crisis in the EU which was analyzed beforehand and states that economic crisis sets free a considerable amount of potential volunteers due to unemployment. (Shahin et al. 2013: 3)

Corruption was widely attributed as an even more damaging factor for the impact of feminist NGOs in Lebanon. NGOs reported to encounter corruption on two different levels: on the side of civil society organizations and on the side of administrative and government actors. The first variety is another consequence of the specific funding situation in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. When money has to be distributed rapidly in emergency cases "the process who you give the money to is a lot less professional. [...] And when it starts to dry up, they will just close up but they have stolen a lot of money." (Keedi) Even though this has not been reported by other interviewees, it is worth further research. Since

“individuals refrain from taking part in civil society because of their lack of trust in others” (Zakaria 2013: 352) as several studies on the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe have shown, corruption among NGOs, which themselves are part of civil society, might have even more grave implications for levels of trust and thus on the quality of civil society engagement.

Secondly, and more broadly reported by the interviewees, corruption on the side of officials is seen as a key restriction to the work of NGOs in Lebanon. Corruption has a long history in Lebanon (Neal & Tansey 2010) and has become part of everyday life and work: “I mean, you experience corruption every day, it’s all around you” (Abou-Habib), basically “[t]his is a problem for everybody” and to feel it “you don’t have to work in an NGO”. (Saleh Anid) However, levels of corruption reached new heights³ during the last years: “it has always existed but it was more discreet, it was more individual, it was (...) more localized. Now, it’s institutionalized corruption.” (Abou-Habib) From exaggerated copying fees for legally free of charge documents to the paychecks attorneys have to hand in to see a detainee even though it is their right (Wansa), corruption poses a multitude of small obstacles in the way of NGOs deteriorating trust on a big scale.

2.6.4 Cohesions and Contradictions of Religion, Laws and Politics in Lebanon

There is an existing and more or less functioning legal framework which provides an operating basis for the NGOs I interviewed for my research: “We have to register as an NGO, you know, in Lebanon. [...]. But [...] we haven’t had any problem with that”, Sarah Wansa from Legal Agenda stated. Anthony Keedi solely states several problems, such as the non-existing laws concerning paternity or maternity leave or social security regulations, whereas most of the interviewees state that the laws provided by the Lebanese state do not pose any substantial problems.

However, it has to be noted that this perception might be skewed by the grave situation of associational and human rights in other countries in the region such as Egypt, Jordan or Syria. This might render substantial problems in the Lebanese legal framework invisible. Lina Abou Habib from CRTD.A states that, “it’s annoying, it’s non responsive, it’s failing. But the margin for maneuver we have is more than in the region.”

This might seem somewhat contradictory regarding the highly problematic connections between religion and

politics in Lebanon. Since its founding days, Lebanese nationalism cannot be thought without sectarianism: “[t]here could be no Lebanese citizen who was not at the same time a member of a particular religious community” (Makdisi 1996: 25) Until today, the depth of religious feelings and its institutionalizations in elections, offices and the parliament cement the fragmentation of Lebanon’s 18 officially recognized sects.

Next to the fact that this system “is keeping women in a subordinate, inferior position” (Abou-Habib) as I argued extensively in Chapter 2, it affects the work being done by Lebanon’s civil society just as much, which by definition is located in the space between all those actors. Support, especially political support, can almost never be neutral in Lebanon:

“if one party is with us, then that means that it’s either Christian or Muslim or **this** type of Christian or **this** type of Muslim, that’s with us or against us. And that says something about the other one.” (Keedi)

In order to reach a multi-confessional audience and beneficiaries from every sect, feminist NGOs have to weigh very carefully the support which is being offered. Receiving religiously affiliated help may result in doubts on the sectarian independence of NGOs, harshly affecting the impact they are able to yield in a general sense. Sarah Wansa gave examples where Legal Agenda took a position causing different actors to start “asking questions that this position we had was [...] an order given by some donor or another.” The necessity to work against this confessional system is one of the few things all interviewees agree upon. “For us, our main fight is against the confessional system”, Lina Abou-Habib from CRTD.A is sure about; and that “something has to be done about it” (Saleh Anid) constitutes a fact for many others. However, this being a task politicians have been failing on for decades, it is also clear this fight is consuming resources and energy that could be used in other ways: it is simply “a level of working that a lot of other people don’t have to face” (Keedi), further restricting the impact they can pose in their advocacy work.

Religion thus is the defining factor of Lebanese politics. Simultaneously, it is the main reason for Lebanon’s highly problematic current political situation – or better non-situation. Lebanon has not seen any elections since 2009, and the parliament decided in 2014 to suspend them at least until 2017. Sectarian tensions have led to a political stalemate where the two major party factions keep on boycotting and blocking parliamentary sessions, leaving the government unable to pass any laws. Simultaneously, the parliament is unable to find

3- In the 2014 corruption perception index published by Transparency International, Lebanon ranks 136 of 175 countries.

a majority for the vacant seat of the President, head of government. Lebanon finds itself in a political deadlock with no swift end in sight.

If this situation constitutes a “failed state”, as Lina Abou-Habib stated in an interview, is up for discussion. However, it is clear that this constant political void and the situation of irresponsibility among actors is a hostile environment for civil society actors of any kind, and was seen as the most restricting factor in this field of work. The limited occasions of being able to see and evaluate their actual impact is a major problem for gender equality NGOs in Lebanon. Political empowerment, especially for women, can simply not take place if there are no elections. To cite Reverter-Bañón another time: “Civil society has no meaning unless it is conceived of in relation to the state.” (2006: 9) Functioning state structures are the basic precondition for NGOs to advocate their interests, and lobby for new legislation. As Nada Saleh Anid describes her work with a project involving chief of government, Nabih Berri:

“We feel very **weird**. I mean, we don’t know if it’s coming or not, who is coming, who is not, who is going to - who is not willing to work with **him** [Nabih Berri, ed. note], who is going to refuse to come. I mean, it’s very complicated. (...) And it’s always like this. I mean, you organize an event, you don’t know (...) what’s going to happen. I mean, it can be postponed, it can be cancelled. [...] It’s our everyday struggle.”

The political situation obviously deprives NGOs of grounds for their ideas, incentives and projects. It is its instability, its volatility, the fact that it “is **always** on the brink, there are always rumors, there are always situations.” (Keedi) that renders effective action incredibly hard. Sarah Wansa explains exemplarily: “You have [...] a law project that gets well. Okay, and we are working on it, let’s pass it to the parliament. And then boom there is no parliament anymore” – simply, “you can’t go ahead with that.”

Trying to change a political structure that is dysfunctional and unaccountable, and at the same time discriminating substantial shares of citizens is an enormous task – but not an impossible one:

“We’re working towards development in a country that’s lead by militia leaders. That’s an uphill battle with a boulder. (...) And we will keep on doing it, and we’ll keep on hoping that things will change and that they will inspire change. (...) Our job is inspiring hope.” (Keedi)

2.6.5 Implications for the Thesis

Comparing the reported impact of internal and external factors, it can be stated that the interviewees were quite unanimously convinced that the most restricting factors are not identified within their work field but much more come from the outside. The substantial impact of economic developments, the blatant corruption on various levels, sectarianism and above all the current political situation saw more or less universal consent.

However, this does not mean that internal factors can be regarded as negligible. The interpretative analysis has shown that two internal factors, funding and collaboration, pose similar obstacles to their work as the overall economic environment. The other factors showed less relevance for the interviewees, however cannot be ignored.

The conclusion concerning this work’s thesis has to be a ‘Yes, but’. I state that the thesis that civil society in Lebanon is primarily restricted by external factors can be verified for the example of non-governmental organizations in the field of gender equality. However, I argue that a concentration on these outward points hides a lot of the genuinely internal problems many feminist NGOs are facing, such as funding structures, the dwindling engagement of the Lebanese public or the lack of cooperation among civil society actors. There is a tradition of blaming most of the problems on the – admittedly problematic and ever more confusing – environment which Lebanon finds itself in these days. However, these structural weaknesses that exist at an internal level cannot be ignored and pose substantial obstacles to the influence civil society may yield.

3. Conclusion

In this empirical work I have tried to solve the puzzle about the dwindling impact of civil society in Lebanon and have thus analysed five non-governmental organizations that engage in promoting gender equality. By comparing both internal and external factors I was able to verify my hypothesis that it is mainly external factors that might pose obstacles to their work.

By using both intensity analysis and qualitative interpretative methods I could show that most external factors, such as economy and corruption, as much as the interrelations between politics and religion, do pose substantial difficulties for the work of these NGOs. Surprisingly, the legal framework provided by the dysfunctional political system was widely appreciated - a factor worthy of further analysis.

However, I could also show that it is essential to take the inherent problems of internal aspects into account in order to fully understand why feminist NGOs are not able to work effectively in Lebanon. Especially factors of funding and its implications for collaborations, the acquisition of personnel and local mobilization proved to be a central obstacle for many interviewees.

However, it is clear that this work can only provide a fairly superficial analysis of this topic. It has to be questioned whether the differentiation between external and internal factors always is as distinctive as it is necessary for academic work. Indeed, many factors are interwoven; a more thorough work will have to take into regard these countless interdependences and maybe employ a less rigidly structured approach.

Also, I was not able to draw conclusions on civil society as a whole. In order to really derive results for a broader audience, other civil society actors would have to be taken into consideration: sectarian organizations, unstructured initiatives or local citizen groups are essential actors in the civil fabric of Lebanon's society.

However, I am sure that this work might be helpful in encouraging further research on the topic. Research that eventually may lead to constructive actions in order to improve the situation for civil society in Lebanon, to the benefit of all its citizens.

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