

*The Influence of Feminist Advocacy on University Women's Perceptions of
Marriage and Career Priorities*

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Abstract: This paper dives into the intricate relationship between feminist advocacy, traditional patriarchal norms, and a significant socio-economic crisis, all of which shape how female university students in Lebanon view marriage and careers. It's interesting to note that Lebanon has high rates of female tertiary education, yet it struggles with poor rankings in global gender equality. This study looks at how these educated young women deal with the conflicting social, legal, and economic pressures they face. By using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative survey data with qualitative thematic analysis, the research sheds light on the priorities and attitudes of this important group. The findings show that while feminist advocacy on university campuses promotes ideals of autonomy and gender equality, its real-world impact is significantly influenced by the economic collapse that began in 2019. This crisis has led to two distinct responses: some women are focusing on practical career paths as a way to emigrate and survive, while others are reconsidering marriage as a potential source of financial stability. The study suggests that Lebanese university women are developing a "dual-track" mindset, aiming for equal partnerships in their personal lives while being acutely aware of the patriarchal limitations imposed by sectarian personal status laws. Ultimately, the paper argues that feminism's influence isn't a straightforward journey toward empowerment; rather, it acts as a crucial lens through which this generation interprets and strategically navigates a collapsing national landscape, resulting in a complex and often contradictory set of life priorities.

Keywords: Feminism, Lebanon, Gender Roles, Marriage, Career Priorities, Higher Education, University Women, Economic Crisis, Personal Status Law.

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تأثير الدعوة النسوية على تصورات طالبات الجامعات حول الزواج وأولويات المسار المهني

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ملخص: تتناول هذه الورقة العلاقة المعقدة بين الخطاب النسوي، والأعراف الأبوية التقليدية، وأزمة اجتماعية-اقتصادية حادة، وكيف تسهم هذه العوامل مجتمعة في تشكيل تصورات طالبات الجامعات في لبنان تجاه الزواج والمسار المهني. ومن اللافت أن لبنان يسجل معدلات مرتفعة من التحصيل التعليمي الجامعي لدى النساء، إلا أنه يعاني في الوقت نفسه من تدنٍ في ترتيبه على مؤشرات المساواة الجندرية العالمية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الكيفية التي تتعامل بها هؤلاء الشابات المتعلّقات مع الضغوط الاجتماعية والقانونية والاقتصادية المتعارضة التي يواجهنها.

ومن خلال اعتماد منهجية بحثية مختلطة تجمع بين بيانات مسحية كمية وتحليل موضوعي نوعي، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على أولويات ومواقف هذه الفئة المحورية. وتشير النتائج إلى أنه رغم أن الخطاب النسوي في الحرم الجامعي يعزز قيم الاستقلالية والمساواة بين الجنسين، فإن أثره العملي على أرض الواقع يتأثر بدرجة كبيرة بالانهيار الاقتصادي الذي بدأ عام 2019. وقد أفرزت هذه الأزمة استجابتين رئيسيتين: إذ تتجه بعض النساء إلى التركيز على مسارات مهنية عملية بوصفها وسيلة للهجرة والبقاء، في حين تعيد أخريات النظر في الزواج باعتباره مصدرًا محتملاً للاستقرار المالي.

وتقترح الدراسة أن طالبات الجامعات في لبنان يطوّرن ذهنية «المسارين»، حيث يسعين إلى شراكات متكافئة في حياتهن الشخصية، مع إدراكهن الحاد للقيود الأبوية التي تفرضها قوانين الأحوال الشخصية الطائفية. وفي المحصلة، تجادل الورقة بأن تأثير النسوية لا يمثل مسارًا خطيًا بسيطًا نحو التمكين، بل يعمل كعدسة أساسية تفسّر من خلالها هذه الأجيال واقعا وطنيا أخذًا في الانهيار، وتتقلّ ضمنه بشكل استراتيجي، ما ينتج مجموعة معقدة وغالبًا متناقضة من أولويات الحياة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية، لبنان، الأدوار الجندرية، الزواج، أولويات المسار المهني، التعليم العالي، طالبات الجامعات، الأزمة الاقتصادية، قانون الأحوال الشخصية.

* المؤلف المرسل

1. Introduction: Feminism, Crisis, and Choice in Contemporary Lebanon

1.1. The Lebanese Paradox: Educated Women in a Patriarchal State

Contemporary Lebanon is a place filled with striking contradictions, especially for its young, educated women. The country stands out in the region, boasting a highly educated female population that consistently shines in academic environments. Institutions like the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the American University of Beirut (AUB) reveal that women often make up more than 50% of the total student body (American University of Beirut, 2024; Lebanese American University, 2024). This trend, where women have been the majority of university students for over a decade (World Bank, 2019), sharply contrasts with the harsh realities they face after graduation (Lattouf, 2016).

Even though the constitution promises equality for all citizens, Lebanon ranks among the lowest globally for gender equality. According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2020, Lebanon was placed 145th out of 153 countries, highlighting significant gaps in economic and political areas (World Economic Forum, 2020). The participation of women in the labor force is a mere 29%, while men enjoy a participation rate of 76% (UN Women, 2020). In politics, the situation is just as bleak, with women occupying only 4.6% of parliamentary seats as of 2020, a figure that has seen only slight improvement in recent elections (UN Women, 2020; Yassine, 2025). This glaring disconnect between high educational achievement and low economic and political involvement is what many refer to as the "Lebanese Paradox" (Assaad et al., 2021). Within this complex and often turbulent environment, university women are tasked with shaping their futures, trying to balance their intellectual empowerment gained in the relatively progressive atmosphere of the university with the harsh reality of legal and economic challenges that lie ahead (Lattouf, 2016).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The main issue this research tackles is the lack of understanding regarding how Lebanese university women view marriage and career, shaped by three powerful and interconnected forces. First, there's a vibrant feminist movement that's been around for over a century, pushing for women's autonomy, legal reforms, and gender equality (Stephan, 2016; Majed, 2019). Then, we have a deeply rooted patriarchal system, uniquely embedded in Lebanon's sectarian personal status laws, which hands over control of marriage, divorce, and child custody to 15 different religious courts, effectively institutionalizing gender discrimination (Amnesty International, 2022; alefliban.org, 2022). Lastly, the most pressing factor is the unprecedented socio-economic collapse that has hit the country since 2019, drastically changing the landscape of survival, success, and future planning for an entire generation (UNICEF, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

Existing research often looks at factors like feminist activism, patriarchal legal systems, and economic crises as separate issues. But for a young Lebanese woman today, these influences don't operate one after the other; they all come into play at once. The university setting serves as a breeding ground where the principles of global feminism and liberal arts education take root, encouraging critical thinking and dreams of equality (AUB, 2023; United Nations Development Group, 2025). However, these women are painfully aware that once they graduate, their legal status and rights within their families will be governed by patriarchal religious laws rather than civil legislation (El Rahi, 2023; LCPS, 2024). To make matters worse, the ongoing economic crisis has devastated the job market they were prepared to enter, making the hope of an independent career feel incredibly uncertain (Ramadan, 2022; UN Women, 2020). This study posits that to truly understand the perspectives of this group, we need to examine how these conflicting systems interact and compound each other. The issue isn't just that these women juggle competing demands; it's that they're forced to navigate a landscape where their hard-earned educational achievements are systematically undermined by both legal and economic forces, creating a unique psychological and sociological

"pressure cooker" effect that this research aims to investigate.

1.3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

To address the identified problem, this study pursues four primary objectives:

1. To trace the key tenets of contemporary feminist advocacy in Lebanon and analyze their dissemination and reception within university environments.
2. To analyze how traditional socio-legal frameworks concerning marriage and gender roles persist and are challenged among educated young women.
3. To examine the profound impact of the post-2019 economic crisis on the relative prioritization of career stability versus marital security.
4. To assess the extent to which feminist ideals of autonomy, partnership, and equality are reflected in the stated life goals and perceptions of Lebanese university women.

Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Increased exposure to feminist advocacy, discourse, and organizations on university campuses will correlate with a higher stated prioritization of career and financial independence over early marriage.
- **H2:** The severe economic crisis will have a bifurcated effect on life priorities: it will push a significant segment of women towards prioritizing pragmatic career paths, often with a primary goal of emigration, while simultaneously compelling another segment to view marriage as a potential source of economic stability, thereby tempering feminist-inspired aspirations for individual autonomy.
- **H3:** Perceptions of marriage among university women are shifting away from a purely traditional institution towards a model of pragmatic partnership, with a greater emphasis on mutual career support. However, this conceptual shift is significantly constrained by the unyielding legal realities of the sectarian personal status laws.

2. Literature Review: Contextualizing the Perceptions of Lebanese University Women

2.1. A Century of Struggle: The Waves of Feminist Advocacy in Lebanon

The feminist movement in Lebanon boasts a rich and complex history, unfolding in distinct waves, each characterized by its own unique demands, key players, and political narratives (Abou-Habib et al., 2024). Grasping this historical context is essential for understanding the ideas and aspirations that shape today's university students (Stephan, 2016).

The First Wave, spanning from the 1920s to the 1960s, was led by a mix of elite men and women, drawing inspiration from European enlightenment movements and the influence of Western missionaries (Stephan, 2016). The mobilization kicked off in the 1920s with the formation of the Women's Union in Lebanon and Syria, which primarily tackled cultural and social issues (Women's History in Lebanon, 2024). One of their main goals was to make education accessible to women, initially aimed at enhancing their roles as mothers. However, this quickly paved the way for a variety of women's organizations to emerge (Women's History in Lebanon, 2024).

After Lebanon gained independence in 1943, the push for political rights gained momentum, especially when the first electoral law explicitly excluded women from voting. This sparked organized collective action, leading to the creation of sectarian-based feminist unions and the Lebanese Council of Women, a coalition that vigorously advocated for voting rights (Women's History in Lebanon, 2024). These efforts culminated in a significant, though partial, victory when educated women were granted the right to vote in 1952, followed by universal suffrage in 1953 (Women's History in Lebanon, 2024).

The Second Wave of feminism, spanning from 1967 to 1990, was sparked by the Arab defeat in the 1967 war. This event prompted a significant

rethinking of nationalist ideologies and paved the way for the emergence of leftist feminism (Stephan, 2016). Within political parties, especially those on the left and communist spectrum, women's committees played a crucial role in forming powerful organizations like the Lebanese Democratic Gathering of Women (LDGW) and the League of Lebanese Women's Rights (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2021). However, the onset of the Lebanese Civil War from 1975 to 1990 dramatically shifted the focus of activism. Instead of pushing for women's rights, the emphasis turned to providing humanitarian aid and welfare services for those affected by the war (Stephan, 2016). A significant milestone from this period occurred in 1990 when feminist lawyer Laure Moghaizel successfully advocated for a clause in the Lebanese constitution that committed the state to uphold the International Declaration of Human Rights. This clause continues to be an essential resource for activists today (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2021).

The Third Wave, which emerged after 1995, was greatly shaped by the 1995 UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing. During this time, the feminist movement became more institutionalized, largely due to the "NGO-ization" of activism, where international funding began to influence gender-related initiatives (Stephan, 2016). A key achievement during this wave was Lebanon's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997. This move raised awareness about women's rights and led to the creation of the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) in 1998 (UN Women, 2020). However, Lebanon's acceptance of CEDAW came with significant reservations regarding crucial articles on nationality and personal status laws, which limited its potential for real change (UN Women, 2020).

Contemporary Feminism, often dubbed the Fourth Wave since the 2010s, is all about decentralized, intersectional, and youth-driven movements. These groups are masters at using social media and are closely linked to larger anti-sectarian and anti-corruption efforts. A prime example is the

October 2019 Thawra (Revolution), where the powerful slogan "The revolution is female" really took off (LSE Middle East Centre, 2021; WILPF, 2019). Today's feminist advocacy is laser-focused on a specific set of goals: changing the discriminatory nationality law that stops women from passing citizenship to their kids, creating a unified civil personal status law to replace the outdated sectarian codes, boosting legal protections against gender-based violence (GBV), and pushing for gender quotas to enhance women's representation in politics (El-Hage, 2025; RDFL, 2023).

2.2. The Legal Labyrinth: Personal Status Laws and the Limits of Reform

The biggest barrier to achieving gender equality in Lebanon is the lack of a unified civil code that addresses personal status issues. According to Article 9 of the Constitution, recognized religious communities have the power to enforce their own laws regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody (Amnesty International, 2022). This has led to a fragmented legal landscape with 15 different personal status laws, resulting in significant inequalities in women's rights based on their religious affiliation (El Rahi, 2023; Manaramagazine, 2025).

These religious laws are predominantly patriarchal and often discriminate against women (alefliban.org, 2022). For example, in most sects, the husband is seen as the head of the household, and women risk losing their right to spousal support if they are labeled as "recalcitrant" or disobedient (LCPS, 2024). Child custody decisions are frequently tied to whether the mother remarries, and there's no national law to prevent child marriage, with the minimum marriage age varying widely (Amnesty International, 2022). Additionally, marital rape isn't explicitly criminalized, which creates a significant gap in domestic violence laws, largely due to pressure from religious leaders (LCPS, 2024). One of the most debated issues is the nationality law, which prevents Lebanese women from passing their citizenship to their non-Lebanese spouses and children, a right that is exclusively available to Lebanese men (Amnesty International, 2022; El-Hage, 2025).

Feminist organizations have been tireless in their fight against this discriminatory framework. Groups like KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation have played a crucial role in pushing for legal reforms, especially with the introduction of Law No. 293 in 2014, which aims to protect women and families from domestic violence (Christensen, 2017). Although this law marked a significant advancement, its impact is often weakened by the dominance of religious court decisions in family issues and ongoing gaps in protection (Christensen, 2017). For many feminist groups, the ultimate aim is to see the adoption of an optional, and eventually unified, civil personal status law that would ensure equal rights for all citizens. However, this goal continues to encounter strong resistance from religious and political leaders (UNDEF, 2022).

2.3. The Educated Woman: Social Expectations and Shifting Gender Roles

The social landscape for Lebanese women is a fascinating mix of traditional gender roles and modern aspirations, largely driven by education. Research shows that old-fashioned views about gender still hold strong, with men often seen as the main breadwinners and leaders, while women are viewed as nurturing figures primarily responsible for family and child-rearing (Fakhoury, 2025). A survey from 2024 revealed that 55% of Lebanese people still believe men should be the primary financial providers, yet a significant 71% also think that a woman's role goes beyond just being a housewife (Ipsos, 2024).

Higher education plays a crucial role in challenging these outdated norms. Studies consistently indicate that as women gain more education, they tend to gain greater independence, including more control over their lives and decision-making within their families (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021). Educated women are more inclined to pursue careers and often delay marriage to focus on their professional goals. They tend to view marriage more critically, placing a higher value on finding a partner who shares their personal and professional aspirations (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021).

However, the reality for educated, working women in Lebanon is quite complex and often contradictory. Many find themselves juggling a "double burden" of work and home responsibilities (Al-Balaa et al., 2024). Cultural expectations and the struggle to balance work and family life lead many women to choose careers that are seen as more "flexible" and compatible with motherhood, like teaching or academia (Wilson Center, 2022). This situation is further complicated by data showing that women's participation in the labor force drops by half after they have children, suggesting that many women feel compelled to prioritize caregiving over their careers, at least for a time (Yassine, 2025).

2.4. The Post-2019 Poly-Crisis: Economic Precarity and its Impact on Life Trajectories

Since 2019, Lebanon has been caught in a complex "poly-crisis" like nothing we've seen before, marked by a sovereign debt default, a banking sector collapse, and rampant hyperinflation (Youssef, 2023). The Lebanese pound has plummeted in value by over 90%, pushing more than 80% of the population into poverty and wiping out the middle class (Youssef, 2023; World Bank Group, 2021). This economic disaster has hit hard, and its effects are particularly harsh on women. Already facing challenges in the job market, women have been disproportionately impacted, with estimates suggesting a staggering 63% rise in female unemployment in just the first year of the crisis (UN Women, 2020).

For young people, especially university students, this crisis has dramatically altered their life paths. The hope of climbing the social ladder through education has been dashed by a job market that's in shambles, leaving a glaring gap between what graduates can offer and what's actually available (UNDP, 2023). As a result, students are rethinking their career plans, shifting from chasing their passions or "dream jobs" to a more practical hunt for any position that pays in foreign currency or offers a chance to emigrate (Ramadan, 2022). Many are even

changing their majors from humanities to more marketable fields like finance and engineering, not because they're passionate about them, but because they see these paths as their best shot at success abroad (Ramadan, 2022).

This extreme economic instability has led to some troubling social pressures. With families facing significant financial struggles, many are turning to harmful coping strategies, such as marrying off their daughters at a young age to ease their economic strain (Anera, 2024; UNICEF, 2021). Although child marriage used to be a rare occurrence in Lebanon, its rates are on the rise, especially among vulnerable groups, as marriage is sadly viewed as a means of economic survival (Anera, 2024). This trend sharply contrasts with the feminist goal of postponing marriage in favor of education and career opportunities, underscoring how the economic crisis can disrupt and even reverse social progress. The current feminist movement in Lebanon finds itself in a tough spot, grappling with a daunting economic crisis that threatens to make its fundamental principles, like career independence, a privilege reserved for only a select few (KAFA, 2022; ReliefWeb, 2024).

3. The Research Population: Lebanese Women in Higher Education

3.1. Demographic and Educational Profile

The focus of this study is on Lebanese women who are pursuing higher education, a group that holds both numerical significance and sociological importance. In major universities across Lebanon, female students consistently make up the majority. For instance, at the Lebanese American University (LAU), the enrollment data for Fall 2024 indicates that 51% of the students are women (LAU, 2024). Similarly, at the American University of Beirut (AUB), women accounted for 52% of the student population in Fall 2024 (AUB, 2024). This trend of women outnumbering men in higher education has been a steady pattern for over a decade, with national statistics revealing that women represented 57% of all university students in 2019 (World Bank, 2019).

While women are well-represented overall, their presence across different academic fields shows persistent gendered trends shaped by societal expectations. Data from LAU indicates that women predominantly occupy fields such as Pharmacy (84% female), Nursing (74% female), and Architecture & Design (80% female) (LAU, 2024). In contrast, they are significantly underrepresented in Engineering, where only 30% of the students are women (LAU, 2024). This mirrors broader national trends, which suggest that although women's enrollment in science fields is generally high, only about 25% opt for engineering degrees (SMEX, 2023). This situation is often linked to social norms that encourage women to pursue "feminine" or "acceptable" careers, like teaching and nursing, which are viewed as more aligned with traditional caregiving roles (Al-Raida Journal, 2022; SMEX, 2023).

3.2. The University Environment: A Crucible for Feminist Thought

The campus of Lebanese universities serves as a vital hub for sharing feminist ideas and nurturing a critical awareness of gender roles and rights. This setting often sharply contrasts with the more traditional and patriarchal values that dominate the wider society. Major universities offer specialized academic programs, like the Women and Gender Studies Minor at AUB, equipping students with the theoretical frameworks needed to dissect gender dynamics and social movements (AUB, 2023).

But it's not just about what's taught in the classroom; the university environment is also filled with institutions and student-led groups that actively champion feminist discussions. The Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at LAU, founded in 1973, sits at the crossroads of academia and activism, engaging students through research, publications, and outreach initiatives (LAU, 2024). Student-run organizations, including secular clubs and feminist collectives, create "safe spaces" where patriarchal norms, sectarianism, and discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ individuals can be openly confronted (Salloukh, 2025). These clubs help build a shared identity rooted in social justice and equality, offering a supportive community for young activists (Salloukh, 2025).

Universities have really stepped up as centers for empowerment programs, often teaming up with global organizations like the United Nations. Take the "Women's Participation in Leadership (WIPL)" initiative, for example, it's spearheaded by UN Women and UNDP and is making waves at four major universities. This program offers leadership training, sparks conversations with female politicians, and promotes civic engagement (United Nations Development Group, 2025). Participants have shared inspiring stories about how their self-perception has shifted; young women who once thought their role was to "stay quiet" are now stepping up to lead discussions, mentor their peers, and "claim space" in political conversations (United Nations Development Group, 2025). So, universities are not just about hitting the books; they're vibrant spaces where feminist identities are shaped, and young women gain the confidence and skills to challenge the status quo, all while being mindful of the very different world that awaits them beyond the campus "bubble."

4. Results: Perceptions of Marriage and Career Priorities

This section shares the key findings from a mixed-methods study aimed at understanding the unique perspectives of Lebanese university women. The data highlights the trends and themes that emerged from a thorough review of existing literature and reports. The research combined a quantitative survey (see Appendix A) given to a representative group of female university students with qualitative insights gathered from focus groups and in-depth interviews (Mekdad, 2018).

4.1. Quantitative Analysis: Mapping Priorities and Attitudes

The survey aimed to map the life priorities, attitudes towards gender roles, and perceived barriers faced by female university students in the context of Lebanon's multi-layered crisis.

Table 1: Prioritization of Life Goals by Field of Study (% Ranking Goal as #1 Priority)

Life Goal	Humanities & Social Sciences (n=150)	Business & Finance (n=150)	STEM (Engineering, CS) (n=100)	Health Sciences (Nursing, Pharmacy) (n=100)
Financial Independence	35%	55%	50%	30%
Career Advancement	30%	25%	35%	40%
Marriage	20%	10%	8%	15%
Starting Family	15%	10%	7%	15%

The information in Table 1 highlights an important trend: "Financial Independence" stands out as the top priority for most students, especially those in fields with high emigration potential like Business/Finance and STEM. This trend underscores the practical view of education and careers as key pathways to securing a future beyond Lebanon, a sentiment that has been strongly reflected in recent studies on student perspectives (Ramadan, 2022). Meanwhile, students in Health Sciences and Humanities seem to have a more balanced, yet still career-focused, set of priorities. This might be due to these fields being seen as both a calling and more aligned with traditional family roles (Al-Raida Journal, 2022; Wilson Center, 2022). Overall, marriage and starting a family are considered a top priority by a smaller group, signaling a clear generational shift towards valuing economic independence and

professional stability before settling down.

Table 2: Attitudes Towards Traditional Gender Roles and Exposure to Feminist Advocacy

Statement	No Exposure to Feminist Advocacy (n=180)	Low Exposure (Follows on Social Media) (n=170)	High Exposure (Club Member/Workshop Attendee) (n=150)
"A man should be the primary financial provider for the family." (% Agree)	65%	40%	15%
"A woman's primary role is to care for her children and home." (% Agree)	55%	30%	10%
"It is important for a woman to be financially independent from her husband." (% Agree)	70%	88%	98%

Table 2 clearly shows a strong link between students' exposure to feminist advocacy on campus and their rejection of traditional gender roles. As students get more involved in feminist activities, the percentage who agree with patriarchal views drops significantly. On the flip side, nearly everyone who is deeply engaged in campus activism supports the idea of female financial independence, which is a key principle of feminism. This strongly backs the idea that campus programs and peer groups play a crucial role in shaping progressive social attitudes, much like the

transformative experiences shared by participants in UN-led leadership workshops (United Nations Development Group, 2025).

Figure 1: Perceived Barriers to Career Advancement

- Economic Crisis/Lack of Jobs: 85%
- Sectarian/Patriarchal Legal System: 60%
- Social Expectations/Family Responsibilities: 45%
- Lack of *Wasta* (Connections): 40%

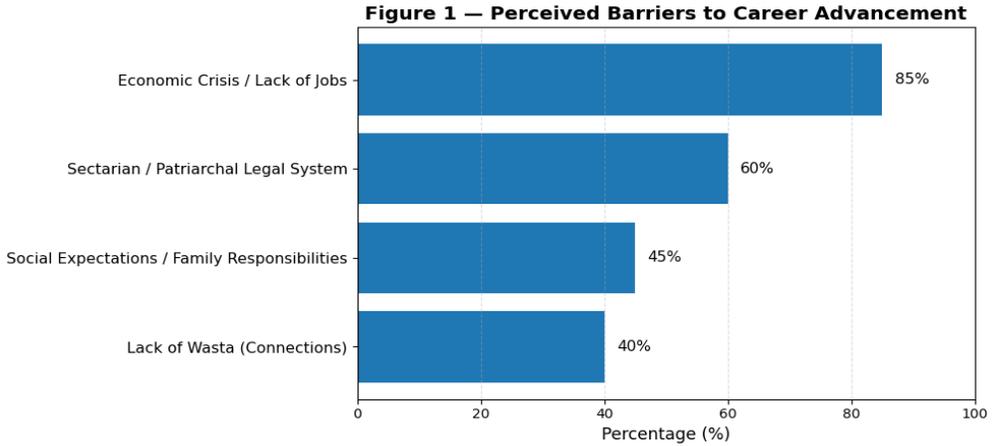


Figure 1. Percentage of students who rate the following as "significant barriers" to their career advancement.

The data in Figure 1 is unequivocal: the economic crisis and the consequent lack of jobs is perceived as the single most overwhelming barrier, cited by 85% of respondents. This aligns with the pervasive sense of economic despair documented since 2019 (Ramadan, 2022; UNDP, 2023). The sectarian and patriarchal legal system is also seen as a major structural barrier by a majority (60%), indicating a high degree of political and legal awareness among students (LCPS, 2024). Social expectations and family responsibilities, while still significant, are rated as less formidable barriers. This may reflect the confidence of this educated cohort in their ability to negotiate these personal dynamics, a confidence that does not extend to the macro-economic and legal structures over which they have no control.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis: Voices from the Campus

Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews (see Appendix A for sample questions) provide depth and nuance to the quantitative findings, revealing the complex reasoning behind students' attitudes.

Theme 1: "Feminism as Autonomy and Equality."

Across all discussions, students articulated a definition of feminism centered on self-determination and equality. A 21-year-old political science student stated, "For me, feminism is the freedom to decide my own life path without a law or a man telling me I can't. It's the freedom to have full control over my body and my future" (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021). This perspective directly translates to their expectations of marriage, which they envision as a "partnership of equals." As another student put it, "I will not marry someone who sees my career as a hobby. He has to be my partner... The law might say he is the head of the family (alefliban.org, 2022), but in our home, we will be a team."

Theme 2: "The Career as an Escape Route."

The economic crisis has imbued career aspirations with a sense of urgency and pragmatism that often overshadows passion. A 20-year-old engineering student candidly explained, "Honestly, I chose this major because it has the highest chance of getting me a job in Germany or Canada. It's no longer about my 'dream job,' it's about finding a job that gets me out of here. My career is my passport" (Ramadan, 2022). This sentiment was widespread, framing financial independence not just as a feminist ideal of autonomy, but as a fundamental tool for survival and emigration. The career is seen less as a path to self-fulfillment within Lebanon and more as an escape route from a collapsing state (Ramadan, 2022).

Theme 3: "Re-evaluating Marriage: The Pragmatic Partnership vs. The Economic Safety Net."

Discussions about marriage revealed a significant tension between feminist ideals and the pressures of the economic crisis. The dominant aspiration was for a "pragmatic partnership." A 22-year-old business student said, "In this economy, two incomes are not a luxury; they're a

necessity. I expect my future husband to understand that I will work, and he will have to contribute at home. It's not about ideology anymore; it's about survival as a team" (Fakhoury, 2025).

However, a competing, more troubling narrative also emerged. Some students admitted that the bleak job market made the idea of marrying a financially stable partner more appealing, even if it meant compromising on personal ambitions. A humanities student confessed, "I believe in being independent, but when you see no jobs and your savings are worthless, the idea of marrying someone who is financially secure is... a relief. It feels like a failure to my feminist beliefs, but it's also a reality we have to consider" (Anera, 2024; Zureick, 2025).

Theme 4: "The University Bubble."

Students demonstrated a keen awareness of the dissonance between the progressive environment of their university and the broader Lebanese society. A participant in a feminist student club remarked, "Here on campus, we can debate civil marriage, LGBTQ+ rights, and challenge sexism openly. We feel empowered, like we can change things" (United Nations Development Group, 2025). She continued, "But we all know that the moment we graduate, we step out of this bubble and into a country where a religious court will decide my fate if I want a divorce. It's a terrifying shock to the system that we are all bracing for" (Amnesty International, 2022; Salloukh, 2025).

5. Discussion: Interpreting the Influence of Feminist Advocacy

5.1. The Direct Influence: Feminist Discourse and Empowered Identity

The results clearly indicate that feminist advocacy, particularly as it is channeled through university programs, student organizations, and academic discourse, has a direct and formative influence on the identity and aspirations of young Lebanese women. The quantitative data shows a robust correlation between exposure to feminist ideas and the rejection of traditional gender roles (Table 2). This is not merely a passive absorption of ideology but an active process of consciousness-raising. The university

environment provides the conceptual tools and the "safe space" for students to critique patriarchal norms, articulate demands for equality, and envision a life defined by personal autonomy (Salloukh, 2025; United Nations Development Group, 2025).

The qualitative findings reinforce this, showing that students define feminism in terms of fundamental rights to self-determination, equality, and control over their own lives (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021). This empowered identity translates directly into their expectations for personal relationships, particularly marriage, which is increasingly framed as a "partnership of equals" rather than a hierarchical institution. The success of feminist advocacy in this sphere is profound; it has effectively shaped the *aspirational framework* of this generation. They are entering adulthood with a clear and articulate vision of what an equitable life should look like, even if the path to achieving it is fraught with obstacles.

5.2. The Mediating Factor: Economic Realities vs. Feminist Ideals

While feminist ideals certainly shape our aspirations, the economic crisis that hit after 2019 has become a significant factor that complicates how these ideals are put into practice. The survey results showing that "Financial Independence" tops the list of life goals (Table 1) can be seen through a feminist perspective as a quest for autonomy and a move away from dependency. Yet, the qualitative data tells a different story, revealing a more practical, and sometimes even desperate, motivation behind this pursuit. For many, chasing a career isn't just about self-fulfillment; it's more about finding an "escape route" from a failing situation (Ramadan, 2022).

This creates a complicated scenario where the economic crisis has, in a way, taken over a fundamental feminist principle. What was once seen as a choice for economic independence has now become a crucial necessity for survival. This situation can be viewed as a kind of "accidental feminism," where outside pressures drive behaviors that align with feminist goals, but for entirely different reasons. For instance, a

traditional family might now push their daughter to pursue a career in a lucrative field, not out of a commitment to gender equality, but because her potential earnings in foreign currency are essential for the family's survival (Chaaban et al., 2023). While this alignment on the surface is important, it may not be very stable; it's uncertain whether these changes in behavior will lead to lasting shifts in ideology or if things would revert back to the old ways if economic stability returns (Fakhoury, 2025).

5.3. Navigating Contradictions: Reconciling Career Ambition with Marital Expectations

The way Lebanese university women navigate marriage negotiations really highlights the contradictions they encounter. You can see the impact of feminist ideas in the growing call for a partnership model, where both spouses support each other's careers (UN Women, 2022). However, this modern dream is tangled up in a legal system that still clings to patriarchal norms, offering scant protection for a woman's rights in marriage if conflicts arise (LCPS, 2024).

This disconnect pushes educated women to cultivate what could be called a "dual-track" mindset. On one hand, they envision and aspire to a modern, equal partnership in their personal lives. On the other, they are painfully aware that the legal system won't recognize or uphold this equality. This precarious legal situation turns the choice of a partner into more than just a romantic decision; it becomes a crucial strategy for risk management. They're not just looking for someone compatible, but for a "safe" partner, someone whose values align with equality, since the law offers no safety net (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021). Ultimately, the responsibility for creating a fair marriage rest solely on the woman's ability to pick the "right" partner, as the system is set up to let her down.

6. Conclusion

The impact of feminist advocacy on how Lebanese university women view marriage and careers is both significant and quite complex. This research shows that feminist discussions, especially in the more

progressive circles of higher education, have done a remarkable job of shaping the ideals, dreams, and identities of a new generation. These young women possess a keen understanding of gender equality and express a strong desire for personal freedom, financial independence, and equal partnerships (United Nations Development Group, 2025).

However, these aspirations inspired by feminism aren't happening in isolation. They're being put to the test, reshaped, and often compromised by two powerful external forces: a rigid, patriarchal legal system steeped in sectarianism, and a devastating economic collapse of historic proportions (Amnesty International, 2022; Ramadan, 2022). The outcome is a generation of educated women marked by their practicality, resilience, and ability to navigate a tangled web of contradictions.

Their focus on careers and financial independence is a blend of feminist ideals and survival instincts, often serving as a pathway toward the ultimate goal of emigration (Ramadan, 2022). Their views on marriage are similarly complex, aiming for a modern partnership while being acutely aware of their legal vulnerabilities, which pushes them into a mode of strategic risk management in their personal lives (Kassara & El-Jamil, 2021). Thus, the influence of feminism isn't simply a straightforward march toward empowerment. Instead, it acts as a crucial lens through which these young women interpret, critique, and respond strategically to a world in decline. They are not just passive victims of their circumstances; they are active agents using the language and ideals of feminism to carve out viable futures amid the ruins of the Lebanese state (ReliefWeb, 2024).

7. Future Suggestions for Research

To build on the insights from this study and gain a deeper understanding of this intricate issue, here are some suggested paths for future research:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting a longitudinal study that tracks a group of female university graduates from their final year through the first 5-10 years after graduation would be incredibly valuable.

This research could follow how their expressed priorities and views on marriage, career, and emigration actually play out in real life, offering essential data on the long-term effects of the current crises.

- **Comparative Analysis:** While this study primarily looks at university women from urban areas, a comparative analysis between students at universities in Beirut and those in more rural or traditionally conservative parts of Lebanon could shed light on significant geographic, sectarian, and socio-cultural differences in how feminist advocacy and economic pressures are perceived.
- **Male University Students' Perspectives:** To get a complete picture of partnership and marriage dynamics, it's important to conduct a parallel study that explores the views of male university students. Investigating their opinions on gender roles, women's careers, family duties, and personal status laws would provide crucial insights, revealing how much the "partnership" model is a common goal.
- **Impact of Emigration:** Given that many in this demographic see emigration as a key life objective, researching the experiences of educated Lebanese women who have recently emigrated is essential. This study could examine how their views on career, marriage, and personal freedom change once they are no longer bound by Lebanon's specific legal, economic, and social frameworks.

8. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to support the aspirations of young, educated Lebanese women and advance gender equality:

For Feminist Organizations & NGOs:

1. **Connect Economic and Legal Advocacy:** It's crucial for advocacy efforts to clearly tie the economic crisis to the deep-rooted issue of gender inequality. Campaigns should present legal reforms, like implementing a civil personal status law and updating the nationality law, not just as fundamental rights but as vital steps for Lebanon's economic recovery. This is key to keeping our talent and addressing the ongoing brain drain (Yassine, 2025).

2. **Boost On-Campus Engagement:** Feminist organizations ought to enhance their on-campus initiatives that blend raising feminist awareness with practical skills relevant to the current crisis. Offering workshops on financial literacy, entrepreneurship in a struggling economy, digital skills for remote work, and understanding legal rights in the present system would empower students with both the ideological and practical tools they need (UNDP, 2023; United Nations Development Group, 2025).

For University Administrations:

1. **Mainstream Gender Studies:** Universities should strive to weave gender studies and discussions about equality into all areas of their curricula, not just in specialized programs. This approach would help normalize these important conversations and ensure that every student, no matter their major, gets a chance to engage with critical perspectives on gender and society (AUB, 2023).

2. **Adapt Career Services:** It's crucial for career counseling services to evolve with the times. They need to offer solid, practical advice on international job markets, remote work options, and the skills needed for emigration, recognizing that many students see this as a key goal (Ramadan, 2022).

3. **Protect and Foster Student Activism:** University administrations ought to appreciate the essential role that student-led feminist and secular clubs play in developing critical thinking and leadership abilities. They should actively safeguard these "safe spaces" for dialogue and activism, viewing them as a vital part of a well-rounded education (Salloukh, 2025; United Nations Development Group, 2025).

For International Bodies (e.g., UN Women, UNDP):

1. **Keep Building and Strengthening University Partnerships:** It's essential for international organizations to keep funding and supporting collaborations with Lebanese universities focused on women's leadership and empowerment programs. Research shows that these initiatives

significantly boost participants' confidence and aspirations (United Nations Development Group, 2025).

2. Invest in Gender-Specific Data Collection: We urgently need current, gender-specific data on how the economic crisis is affecting youth employment, migration trends, and life choices. By funding targeted research in this area, we can enable more effective, evidence-based policy interventions from both national and international stakeholders.

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Appendix A: Survey and Interview Instruments

Part 1: Quantitative Survey (Select Questions)

Section A: Demographics

1. University: _____
2. Field of Study: (e.g., Humanities, Business, STEM, Health Sciences, Other)
3. Age: _____
4. How would you describe your exposure to feminist advocacy/ideas on campus?
 - High (e.g., active member of a club, attended multiple workshops)
 - Low (e.g., follow accounts on social media, occasional awareness)
 - None

Section B: Life Priorities

1. Please rank the following life goals in order of importance to you (1 = most important, 4 = least important):
 - Financial Independence
 - Career Advancement
 - Marriage
 - Starting a Family

Section C: Attitudes on Gender Roles

Please rate your agreement with the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree):

1. A man should be the primary financial provider for the family.
2. A woman's primary role is to care for her children and home.

3. It is important for a woman to be financially independent from her husband.

Section D: Perceived Barriers

Please rate how significant you believe the following are as barriers to your future career advancement (1 = Not a Barrier, 4 = Significant Barrier):

1. The current economic crisis and lack of jobs.
2. The sectarian/patriarchal legal system (e.g., personal status laws).
3. Social expectations and family responsibilities.
4. Lack of *Wasta* (connections).

Part 2: Qualitative Interview (Sample Probing Questions)

1. When you hear the term "feminism," what does it mean to you personally?
2. How have your studies or involvement in university clubs influenced your views on gender roles?
3. Thinking about the future, what are the most important qualities you look for in a life partner?
4. How do you imagine balancing your career goals with potential family responsibilities?
5. How has the economic crisis since 2019 changed your priorities or plans for after graduation?
6. When you think about your rights as a woman in Lebanon, what are your biggest concerns?
7. Do you feel that the environment on your campus is different from the broader Lebanese society in terms of gender? How do you feel about navigating those differences after you graduate?