



Speech by Ambassador Christina Lassen
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"Gender Equity and Political Participation of Women in Lebanon"

***On the occasion of
"International Women's Day"***

8 March 2016 – Beirut Municipality

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

President of the Beirut Municipality Bilal Hamad,

Dear all,

Today, on 8 March, women around the globe are again celebrating International Women's Day, highlighting achievements and pointing to challenges and hurdles that are still lying ahead. In spite of much attention and many 8 of March events over the years, women and girls continue to suffer not just discrimination and violence, but also markedly from lower levels of political influence in every part of the world.

Equality between men and women is a fundamental principle of the European Union since the very beginning of European integration. Today, the principle of gender equality remains a top priority for us, both internally in the EU and in our relations with our partners.

We fight for those rights not just because of fairness to women, but also because it is difficult to change things when you are not represented at the table. When women are underrepresented in politics and board rooms, their voices are not heard equally in the decisions that most affect their lives.

We all know that like other societal changes, gender equality cannot be reached quickly or easily. However, I think we can also agree that Lebanon has a special obligation to do more to achieve equality between men and women, in particular in the political sphere.

When it comes to political participation, a few examples are illustrating:

- Firstly, the extremely low participation of Lebanese women in key positions in Government and Parliament: as you know, there is currently only one government minister and 4 Members of Parliament. This is lower than most countries in the region, surprisingly.
- Moreover, on municipal level, even though there was an increase in the number of women in municipal councils from 3 percent to 6 percent in 2010, it is still very low.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union and its Member States started a long time ago to eliminate barriers that stand in the way of gender equality, and still today we are working hard to make equality between women and men a reality not only on paper.

If one lesson is to be drawn from the European experience, it is that the one thing that can be done to protect the rights of women and girls is to allow them to increase their

participation in political and public life, giving them a fair share in the political representation of Lebanese society.

We are not saying that the European Union is perfect on this issue. And I think every woman trying to engage herself in politics in Europe has realised that if not many times, then at least occasionally in her life. But the participation of women in politics in the EU countries has moved considerably over the last few years, where last year, women on average accounted for 28% of Members of Parliaments in the EU countries. In some EU Member States, the numbers are much higher, for example in Sweden 43.6%, Finland 41.5%, or Spain 40%.

In this respect, 2016 can be an important year for women in Lebanon. Municipal elections will be taking place in May and preparations are in full swing to ensure the sound conduct of the elections. All over the country, Lebanese citizens will be invited to have their say on the composition of the municipal councils and the election of new Mukhtars.

The municipal elections in May will be a great opportunity for women to get a seat at the table. There was an excellent book a couple of years ago written by the CEO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg. The book describes some of the visible and invisible barriers for women to take leadership in politics as well as in business. The book is called "Lean in", and that is exactly what it is about. All women should "lean in" and push for a seat on the table. We can continue complaining about and working on unfair societal structures, but we also need to want to lean in and take our seat.

The municipal elections this year will be a chance for all Lebanese women to do so: to achieve a greater participation in decision-making, both by actively expressing their

opinion by voting for women and by presenting their candidacies, either becoming members of the municipal councils or heads of municipal councils, and also accessing to the traditionally "male-associated" profession of the Mukthar.

For this to happen, we need a collective effort by all: political parties, religious leaders, civil society, the media; all play an important role in overcoming the structures and the traditions that hamper women's presence in political life. But most of all, we need the women of Lebanon to *lean in* and take up this opportunity.

I therefore hope that the campaign we are launching today will help to encourage greater involvement of women in political life and will provide an excellent opportunity for the Lebanese women to actively participate in the municipal elections in May.

Thank you.