

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Role of Women in Peace Building: Case of Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of women in peacebuilding in Lebanon, focusing on the intersection of religion, gender, sectarianism, and political participation. It addresses the gap between women's significant contribution to grassroots peacebuilding and their limited participation in formal peace processes. Adopting a qualitative approach supported by survey data, the study draws on 22 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders, political figures, women working in peacebuilding and empowerment organisations, university instructors, and women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, alongside 260 survey responses. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns concerning women's peacebuilding activities, religious engagement, and the barriers that restrict women's participation.

The findings indicate that Lebanese women play a crucial but often under-recognised role in peacebuilding through informal mediation, advocacy, education, community engagement, social networking, and faith-based initiatives. However, their participation in formal peacebuilding and decision-making processes remains constrained by patriarchal norms, sectarian political structures, religiously informed cultural expectations, and institutional barriers. The survey findings demonstrate broad recognition of women's contribution to peacebuilding, widespread acknowledgement of the cultural and religious barriers that restrict women's leadership, and strong support for greater inclusion of women in formal peace negotiations. Drawing on Northern Ireland as a comparative analytical framework, the study highlights how women's grassroots activism can contribute to more inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding when supported by appropriate institutional mechanisms.

The study concludes that women's participation is not merely desirable but necessary for sustainable peace in Lebanon. It recommends legal, institutional, and social reforms to formalise women's peacebuilding roles, support women-led initiatives, promote interfaith and cross-community dialogue, and challenge the sectarian and patriarchal structures that continue to restrict women's political and peacebuilding agency.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 January 2026

Accepted 9 June 2026

Published 30 June 2026

KEYWORDS

Women, Peacebuilding,
Lebanon, Religion,
Sectarianism, Patriarchy

FIELDS OF STUDY

Women's and Gender
Studies, Political Science,
Sociology, International
Relations and Security
Studies, Human Rights
Studies

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Cite this article as : Harb, W. (2026). Role of Women in Peace Building: Case of Lebanon. *Journal Index of Exploratory Studies*, 8(22), 1-28.

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1. Introduction

Women's participation in peacebuilding is increasingly recognised as essential, particularly in societies marked by religious division, sectarian conflict, and patriarchal political structures. Although women have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to contribute to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and social cohesion, their participation in formal peace processes remains limited (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002; Paffenholz, 2015). This tension is especially evident in Lebanon, where women play a crucial role in grassroots peacebuilding through community initiatives, informal mediation, advocacy, education, and faith-based networks, while remaining largely excluded from official political and religious decision-making spaces.

Lebanon's peacebuilding challenges are deeply connected to its sectarian political system and patriarchal social order. Religious identity often shapes political affiliation, social belonging, and access to power, while gender norms continue to restrict women's public authority. Within this context, women's peacebuilding efforts are frequently informal and under-recognised. Nevertheless, Lebanese women use religion's positive moral values, such as compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation, to promote dialogue and challenge communal divisions. Their work demonstrates that religion can serve not only as a source of division, but also as a form of soft power capable of encouraging coexistence and societal transformation. This research examines the role of women in peacebuilding in Lebanon, focusing on how women navigate religious, political, and social barriers to contribute to peace. It argues that women are not passive victims of conflict or sectarian structures; rather, they are active agents who use community relationships, religious values, emotional intelligence, and informal mediation to build trust across divided groups. Participants in this study highlighted women's unique perspectives, their capacity for empathy, and their ability to foster dialogue within families, communities, and civil society organisations. These findings align with feminist peacebuilding scholarship, which emphasises that sustainable peace requires women's active participation and the inclusion of their lived experiences in peace processes (Gilligan, 1982; Enloe, 2004; Pankhurst, 2003).

The study also draws comparative lessons from Northern Ireland, where women's peacebuilding efforts were once similarly constrained by sectarianism and patriarchy but later gained recognition through grassroots activism and formal political participation. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, in particular, illustrates how women can move from the margins of community activism into formal peace negotiations, contributing to broader agendas of equality, human rights, victims' rights, and social justice (Fearon & McWilliams, 1999; McWilliams, 1997). This comparison is essential for Lebanon because both contexts share histories of religious division, communal mistrust, and male-dominated political systems. Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach supported by survey data. It draws on semi-

structured interviews, ethnographic analysis, and survey responses to examine perceptions of religion and women's peacebuilding involvement in Lebanon. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts, particularly concerning women's grassroots activism, informal mediation, religious engagement, and exclusion from formal institutions. Thus, this study argues that expanding and formalising women's peacebuilding roles in Lebanon requires legal, social, and institutional reform. Recognising women's contributions is not only a matter of gender equality; it is a necessary condition for building a more inclusive, legitimate, and sustainable peace.

Despite growing recognition of women's contributions to peacebuilding, their participation in formal peace processes in Lebanon remains limited. Existing scholarship has highlighted the importance of women's grassroots activism, yet insufficient attention has been given to the ways in which religion simultaneously facilitates and constrains women's peacebuilding roles within Lebanon's sectarian political context. This study addresses this gap by examining how women navigate religious, political, and social structures to contribute to peacebuilding while remaining largely excluded from formal decision-making processes. This study aims to examine the role of women in peacebuilding in Lebanon, with particular attention to the intersections of religion, gender, sectarianism, and political participation. It seeks to explore how religion influences women's involvement in peacebuilding initiatives and to identify the social, cultural, religious, and institutional barriers that continue to restrict women's participation in formal peace processes. Furthermore, the study draws comparative lessons from Northern Ireland as a means of identifying approaches that may contribute to more inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding practices in the Lebanese context. So, it answers the below:

1. How do Lebanese women contribute to grassroots peacebuilding initiatives?
2. How does religion shape women's participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts?
3. What barriers restrict women's participation in formal peacebuilding and political decision-making processes?
4. What lessons from Northern Ireland can inform efforts to strengthen women's participation in peacebuilding in Lebanon?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, the literature review the study highlights previous studies; second, the methodology outlines the research design and data collection methods; third, the results and discussion present and analyse the findings; and finally, the conclusion offers policy recommendations for strengthening women's participation in peacebuilding.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminist Perspectives on Women and Peacebuilding

The literature on women and peacebuilding provides an important foundation for understanding the role of Lebanese women in religiously and politically divided societies. Across feminist peacebuilding scholarship, women are increasingly recognised as essential actors in conflict resolution, reconciliation, and community transformation. However, despite this recognition, their participation in formal peace processes remains limited. Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) argue that women's experiences of war and peace are frequently marginalised, even though women often sustain communities during conflict and contribute substantially to post-conflict recovery. Similarly, Paffenholz (2015) demonstrates that women's inclusion in peace processes enhances the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and sustainability of peace agreements. These arguments are particularly relevant to Lebanon, where women contribute actively to grassroots peacebuilding but remain largely excluded from official political and religious decision-making structures.

Feminist theory offers several conceptual tools for examining women's roles in peacebuilding. Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care highlights the importance of relational responsibility, empathy, and care-oriented moral reasoning. Although this approach must be used carefully to avoid essentialising women as naturally peaceful, it remains useful for understanding how women's socially constructed roles as caregivers, mothers, educators, and community organisers can become resources for peacebuilding. In the Lebanese context, where participants in this study associated women with emotional intelligence, empathy, mediation, and social awareness, Gilligan's framework helps explain the relational foundations of women's informal peacebuilding work. Enloe (2004) extends this discussion by showing how militarism and political conflict rely on gendered systems of power that often render women's contributions invisible. Her work is important because it challenges traditional peacebuilding frameworks that prioritise male political elites, military actors, and formal negotiators while overlooking women's grassroots efforts. Okin's (1989) critique of the public-private divide is also relevant, since women's exclusion from formal peacebuilding cannot be separated from broader gender inequalities within family, religious, and community life. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further challenges fixed assumptions about women's roles, allowing women to be understood not only as caregivers but also as mediators, activists, religious actors, and political agents. Together, these feminist perspectives reveal that women's exclusion from formal peacebuilding is not accidental, but structurally produced through patriarchal norms and institutions.

The literature also shows that peacebuilding must be understood as more than the absence of violence. Pankhurst (2003) argues that sustainable peace requires women's

active participation to be embedded in peace processes rather than treated as symbolic or secondary. Hyndman (2004) similarly stresses the need for inclusive, gender-sensitive peacebuilding strategies that take women's lived experiences seriously. Cockburn (2010) further argues that feminist peacebuilding expands the meaning of peace to include equality, social justice, and gender parity. This broader understanding is essential for Lebanon, where peace cannot be reduced to elite political agreements while sectarianism, patriarchy, and institutional exclusion continue to limit women's participation.

2.2. Religion, Gender, and Women's Peacebuilding Agency

Religion adds another layer of complexity to women's peacebuilding. In divided societies, religion may operate both as a source of conflict and as a tool for reconciliation. In Lebanon, where religious identity is deeply intertwined with political belonging, religion can reinforce sectarian boundaries. At the same time, it can also provide moral resources for peace, including compassion, forgiveness, justice, tolerance, and social responsibility. This dual role is central to the present study. Rather than treating religion only as an obstacle, the research examines how Lebanese women use religion's positive connotations through community and faith-based networks to promote dialogue and social cohesion. The literature on women and Islam demonstrates that religion can function as both constraint and empowerment. Wadud (1999) argues that Islamic texts can be reread through a feminist lens to support gender equality and justice. Mernissi (1996) similarly challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic history and religious authority, arguing that women's marginalisation often results from male-dominated interpretation rather than religion itself. Abu-Lughod (1993) shows how women's networks within religious and gendered spaces may create solidarity and enable women to navigate patriarchal norms. Mahmood (2005) complicates secular assumptions about agency by showing that women's religious participation can itself become a space of moral discipline, social support, and influence. These perspectives are important for the Lebanese case because women's peacebuilding does not necessarily occur outside religion; rather, many women work within religiously shaped communities to promote reconciliation, dialogue, and coexistence.

In Middle Eastern and Lebanese contexts, women's civil society engagement has been recognised as a vital component of peacebuilding. Al-Ali (2009) highlights women's political and civic participation in the region, showing that women's engagement is essential not only for empowerment but also for broader reconciliation and social transformation. Dajani (2017) contributes more specifically to the Lebanese context by examining how women's NGOs address gender inequality, social justice, and community development. Her work is significant because it connects religious reinterpretation with practical grassroots action, showing how Lebanese women's

organisations contribute to peacebuilding even when religious and political structures restrict their formal authority.

2.3. Lebanese Women's Peacebuilding in a Sectarian Context

Feminist peacebuilding scholarship often highlights women's exclusion from formal peace processes but does not always examine how religious identities shape women's peacebuilding agency. Similarly, studies on women and Islam provide valuable insights into religious interpretation and agency, but they do not always connect these insights directly to peacebuilding practice. In Lebanon, where gender, religion, sectarianism, and political authority intersect, this separation is analytically limiting. Women's peacebuilding cannot be fully understood through gender alone, nor through religion alone. It requires a framework that examines how women navigate patriarchal, sectarian, legal, and institutional barriers while using religious and community-based resources to promote peace.

Lebanon's sectarian political system creates particularly strong barriers to women's formal participation. Political authority is organised through confessional power-sharing, and religious affiliation often shapes access to representation, leadership, and public legitimacy. While this system was intended to manage pluralism, it has also entrenched sectarian identities and reinforced male-dominated leadership. Within this structure, women's contributions to peacebuilding are often located at the grassroots level rather than in formal negotiations.

2.4. Comparative Lessons from Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland provides a comparative case because it shares certain historical parallels with Lebanon, including sectarian division, religiously shaped identity, and patriarchal political culture. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition offers an important example of how women's grassroots activism can move into formal political participation. Fearon and McWilliams (1999) show how women organised across communal divides to advocate for equality, human rights, and social justice during the peace process. McWilliams (1997) demonstrates that women's activism influenced political negotiations by broadening the agenda beyond constitutional questions to include victims' rights, integrated education, health, and community development. Porter (2003) similarly shows that women's participation introduced wider social concerns into formal peace discussions. The Northern Irish case does not provide a simple model that can be transferred directly to Lebanon. The two contexts differ historically, politically, and institutionally. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland demonstrates that women's peacebuilding roles can become formally recognised when grassroots mobilisation is supported by political opportunity, coalition-building, and institutional mechanisms. For Lebanon, this comparison is useful because it shows that women's

informal peacebuilding should not remain confined to the margins. If women are already building peace through mediation, education, advocacy, and interfaith engagement, then legal and institutional reforms are needed to formalise and resource their participation.

2.5. Conceptual Gap and Contribution of the Study

Although existing literature provides valuable insight into women's role in peacebuilding, several gaps remain. Feminist peacebuilding scholarship has shown that women are frequently excluded from formal negotiations, despite their documented contributions to conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). This exclusion shows that women's participation can strengthen the inclusiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of peace processes (Paffenholz, 2015). However, much of this literature focuses on women's presence in formal peace processes without fully examining how religious identity and sectarian political structures shape women's peacebuilding roles in contexts such as Lebanon. A second gap concerns the relationship between religion and women's agency. Studies on women and Islam demonstrate that religious interpretation can either restrict or empower women's public participation. Wadud (1999), for example, shows how feminist rereadings of Islamic texts can support gender equality, while Mernissi (1996) challenges patriarchal interpretations of religious authority. Abu-Lughod (1993) and Mahmood (2005) further complicate this discussion by showing that women's agency may also emerge within religious and gendered spaces, rather than only through opposition to them. Yet, these insights are not always connected directly to peacebuilding practice, particularly in sectarian societies where religion shapes both community life and political authority.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Lebanese women's peacebuilding at the intersection of religion, patriarchy, and sectarian politics. It builds on feminist arguments that women's grassroots contributions are often undervalued by formal peacebuilding frameworks, even when they are central to community survival and social repair (Enloe, 2004). In Lebanon, women are not only informal caregivers or community supporters; they are active peacebuilders who use faith-based networks, social relationships, dialogue, advocacy, and informal mediation to promote reconciliation. This reflects Hyndman's (2004) argument that women's lived experiences must be taken seriously in peacebuilding analysis, as well as Cockburn's (2010) broader view of peace as a social condition rooted in justice and gender equality. The study further contributes by drawing comparative lessons from Northern Ireland, where women's peacebuilding efforts moved from grassroots activism toward formal recognition. The experience of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition demonstrates how women's mobilisation can broaden peace agendas beyond elite political settlements. Fearon and McWilliams (1999) show how women organised across communal divides, while McWilliams (1997) highlights their influence on political negotiations. Porter (2003) similarly

demonstrates that women's participation introduced wider social concerns, including victims' rights, integrated education, equality, and community development, into formal peace discussions.

Recent scholarship on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has highlighted both the achievements and continuing limitations of UNSCR 1325 implementation across conflict-affected societies. While the resolution established an important normative framework for promoting women's participation in peace processes, studies published over the last decade indicate that women remain underrepresented in formal negotiations and post-conflict governance structures despite increasing recognition of their contributions at the grassroots level (UN Women, 2023; PeaceWomen, 2024). Research on the Middle East further demonstrates that cultural norms, institutional barriers, and unequal access to political power continue to constrain women's participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes (UN Women, 2023). At the same time, evidence suggests that gender-inclusive peace processes are associated with broader legitimacy, stronger social inclusion, and more sustainable peace outcomes. These debates are particularly relevant to Lebanon, where women have long contributed to community reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, and civil society initiatives but continue to face barriers to formal political and peacebuilding participation. The WPS framework therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine both the opportunities and constraints shaping women's peacebuilding roles in Lebanon.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach supported by survey data to examine the role of women in peacebuilding in Lebanon, with particular attention to the relationship between religion, gender, sectarianism, and political participation. This approach is appropriate because the research explores lived experiences, perceptions, and social practices that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement alone. The study focuses primarily on Lebanon, while Northern Ireland is used as a retrospective comparative case study to identify relevant lessons from a context where women's grassroots peacebuilding efforts became more formally recognised.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The study draws on two primary sources of data: semi-structured interviews and survey responses. Together, these methods enabled an in-depth exploration of women's roles in peacebuilding while also capturing broader public perceptions regarding religion, gender, and peacebuilding in Lebanon.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants who possessed relevant knowledge or experience in peacebuilding, religion, politics, women's

activism, or community leadership. The participants included religious leaders from different sects, political figures, women working in peacebuilding NGOs, university instructors, representatives of women’s empowerment organisations, and women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The interview questions explored participants’ views on religion as an instrument of peace, the role of religious leaders in conflict resolution, women’s involvement in peacebuilding, the barriers women face, and the lessons Lebanon may draw from Northern Ireland. Interviews were conducted either in person or online and typically lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. With participants’ consent, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The survey questionnaire was designed to complement the qualitative findings by examining broader perceptions of women’s participation in peacebuilding, their exclusion from formal negotiations, and the cultural and religious barriers affecting their leadership. Survey participants were recruited through online distribution channels, community networks, professional contacts, and participant referrals. A combination of purposive, quota, and snowball sampling techniques was employed to ensure diversity across gender, age, educational background, and religious affiliation. The survey generated 260 responses from Lebanese adults.

Data collection was conducted in two phases. The interviews were carried out between August and November 2023, while the survey was administered between October and December 2024. Conducting the research in two phases enabled the study to first identify key themes through qualitative interviews and subsequently examine whether these themes were reflected in wider public perceptions. This mixed-methods design strengthened the study by capturing both detailed individual experiences and broader social attitudes towards women’s peacebuilding roles and the influence of religion on peace processes. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of survey respondents and demonstrates diversity across gender, age, educational background, and religious affiliation.

Table 1: Summary of Data Sources and Participants

Data source	Sample / number	Description
Semi-structured interviews	22 participants	Religious leaders, politicians, women NGO workers, university instructors, women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds
Survey questionnaire	260 responses received	Lebanese adult respondents; item-level responses vary between 255 and 259 due to non-response

Comparative case Northern Ireland Retrospective case used for comparison, not primary data collection

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 260)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	124	48.1
	Female	134	51.9
Age	18–24	194	75.8
	25–34	41	16
	35–44	10	3.9
	45–54	6	2.3
	55–64	5	2
Educational Background	High School	56	21.7
	Bachelor's Degree	161	62.4
	Master's Degree	36	14
	Doctoral Degree	3	1.2
	Teaching Diploma + Bachelor's	2	0.7
Religious Affiliation	Islam	163	63.4
	Christianity	56	21.8
	Other	38	14.8

3.3. Survey Design

Survey questionnaires were used to support the qualitative findings and identify broader patterns in perceptions of women's peacebuilding roles. The survey examined respondents' views on women's participation in grassroots peacebuilding, their exclusion from formal negotiations, and the cultural and religious barriers that restrict their leadership. Prior to full-scale distribution, the questionnaire was pilot tested to assess clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Feedback obtained during the pilot stage resulted in minor revisions to question wording and structure. Internal consistency checks and reliability assessments were subsequently undertaken to enhance the robustness of the survey instrument and ensure the quality of the data collected.

The inclusion of survey data strengthened the study by providing measurable indications of wider social attitudes. For example, almost 60% of respondents affirmed women's positive role in peacebuilding, around 70% identified cultural and religious barriers as obstacles to women's leadership, and 75% agreed that women's inclusion in formal negotiations would contribute to more sustainable peace.

3.4. Sampling Strategy and Thematic Analysis

The study used purposive, snowball, and quota sampling. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct relevance to the research topic, including individuals involved in religious leadership, politics, civil society, education, and women's peacebuilding initiatives. Snowball sampling helped reach additional participants, particularly grassroots actors whose peacebuilding work may not be formally documented. For the survey, purposive and quota sampling were used to ensure diversity across relevant categories, including gender, age, religious affiliation, and social background. Participants were required to be aged 18 or above and to have relevant knowledge, experience, or exposure to peacebuilding, religious engagement, or community leadership. Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis framework. The process involved: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) identification of patterns and theme development; (4) review of themes for consistency and coherence; (5) refinement and definition of themes; and (6) production of the final analytical narrative. This systematic approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns concerning women's participation in peacebuilding and the role of religion in peace processes. Then, NVivo 14 software was utilised to support the coding and organisation of qualitative data. Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, coded systematically, and grouped into thematic categories. The software facilitated the management of large volumes of qualitative material, enhanced transparency in the analytical process, and supported the identification of relationships between emerging themes.

3.5. Comparative Case Justification

Northern Ireland was selected as a retrospective comparative case because, like Lebanon, it experienced prolonged conflict shaped by sectarian identity, religious affiliation, and patriarchal political structures. However, the comparison is not intended to present Northern Ireland as a direct model for Lebanon. The two contexts differ in their colonial histories, institutional frameworks, geopolitical environments, and current conflict dynamics. Rather, Northern Ireland is used analytically to identify transferable mechanisms, particularly women's coalition-building, cross-community mobilisation, international support, and the movement from grassroots activism to formal political recognition. These lessons require careful adaptation to Lebanon's confessional system, where sectarian power-sharing and religious authority continue to structure political participation.

3.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Methodological triangulation was employed by comparing evidence obtained from semi-structured interviews and survey responses. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings by enabling the cross-verification of recurring themes and patterns across multiple sources of data.. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee at Glasgow Caledonian University prior to data collection. Participation in both the interviews and survey was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants received information outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the intended use of the data. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

4. Results

The findings reveal that Lebanese women play a significant but under-recognised role in peacebuilding, particularly at the grassroots level. Across the semi-structured interviews and survey responses, women were described as active contributors to reconciliation through informal mediation, advocacy, education, social networking, and community engagement. However, the data also show that women's contributions remain largely excluded from formal peace negotiations and institutional decision-making structures. The results are organised around five main themes: women's grassroots role, women as mediators and community leaders, survey findings on inclusion, barriers to participation, and comparative lessons from Northern Ireland.

4.1. Women's Grassroots Role in Peacebuilding

A key theme emerging from the qualitative data concerns women's distinctive contribution to peacebuilding through empathy, emotional intelligence, and community-based leadership. Participants frequently associated women with the ability to listen, mediate, and build trust across social and sectarian divides. Women were described not only as caregivers or mothers, but also as educators, community organisers, activists, and informal mediators.

Several participants emphasised that women's lived experiences provide them with a valuable perspective in conflict resolution. One participant stated:

"The role of women in building peace in society is essential and influential. Women provide a unique perspective and vital experiences that contribute to enhancing stability and resolving conflicts." (*Participant 8, interview participant*)

Another participant connected women's leadership to their ability to combine emotional and rational approaches:

“Women should be in leadership and positions of authority. Since they combine the emotional and the rational self, they can spread peace more easily.” (*Participant 2, interview participant*)

A further participant linked women’s social roles to their capacity to foster peaceful communities:

“Being a mother can contribute to maintaining peace, but women can also play a significant role in fostering peaceful communities through their involvement in institutions and organizations.” (*Participant 10, interview participant*)

These suggest that participants understood women’s emotional intelligence not only as a personal quality, but also as a practical peacebuilding resource. Women’s capacity for empathy, social awareness, and relational engagement was repeatedly framed as valuable for mediation, dialogue, and social cohesion.

Table 3: Main Qualitative Themes on Women’s Role in Peacebuilding in Lebanon

Theme	Participants	References
Women’s unique perspective and emotional intelligence	7	7
Facilitating conflict resolution through informal mediation and dialogue	3	4
Women’s participation in lobbying, activism, social networking, and campaigns	5	6

4.2. Women as Mediators, Activists, and Community Leaders

The findings also show that women contribute to peacebuilding through activism, lobbying, social campaigns, and informal mediation. Participants highlighted women’s involvement in NGOs, educational initiatives, local committees, and interfaith or community-based activities. These roles were often described as informal but socially influential.

One participant explained:

“In Lebanon, women play a crucial role in peacebuilding through grassroots activism, advocacy, and community engagement.” (*Participant 1, interview participant*)

Another participant emphasised women’s role in education and awareness-raising:

“The world is ignorant of the idea that women have a major role in every person’s life. They are the primary educators who raise awareness and not ignorance.” (*Participant 3, interview participant*)

Women’s peacebuilding was also linked to economic empowerment and the expansion of social networks. One participant argued that women’s access to employment, small loans, vocational training, and economic advice can strengthen their ability to participate in peacebuilding:

“Through economic empowerment by supporting all women to enter the labour market and develop their own projects by providing small loans, vocational training, and economic advice.” (*Participant 8, interview participant*)

The data further show that women's informal mediation often occurs in everyday settings, including families, neighbourhoods, civil society groups, and local religious or cultural spaces. One participant described women as natural mediators within divided communities:

"Women often act as mediators, bringing diverse perspectives and fostering dialogue between conflicting parties. They also take on leadership roles in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, promoting social cohesion." (*Participant 5, interview participant*)

Another participant described how conflict-resolution training strengthened women's practical mediation skills:

"I was in a workshop that included women of all religions, and after completing the intensive training over the course of a year, we established a committee for local mediators and conflict resolution." (*Participant 6, interview participant*)

The same participant connected mediation skills to women's everyday social roles:

"Within my work in the committee, I realised that women are the best mediators, and these skills were intersected already in their roles as wives and mothers." (*Participant 6, interview participant*)

These findings confirm that women's peacebuilding is not always visible in official political processes, but it is deeply embedded in community life. Women contribute through relational, educational, and organisational practices that support reconciliation from below. Table 4 shows that the survey findings further support these qualitative observations, with respondents identifying women primarily as educators and communicators of peace, caretakers of families affected by conflict, community organisers and activists, and mediators and negotiators.

Table 4. Perceived Roles of Women in Peacebuilding

Role Identified by Respondents	%
Educators and communicators of peace	45.5
Caretakers of families affected by conflict	24.7
Community organisers and activists	19.2
Mediators and negotiators	7.5
Other responses	3.1

4.3. Survey Findings on Women's Inclusion

The survey findings support the qualitative results by showing broad recognition of women's role in peacebuilding, while also confirming the persistence of cultural and religious barriers. Almost 60% of respondents affirmed that women play a positive role in peacebuilding, especially at the grassroots level. Around 70% identified cultural and religious barriers as major obstacles limiting women's leadership in peace processes. In

addition, 75% agreed that increasing women's inclusion in formal peace negotiations would contribute to more sustainable peace. These findings reveal a clear contradiction: women's contribution to peacebuilding is widely recognised at the community level, yet their formal participation remains restricted. The data therefore point to a gap between social recognition and institutional inclusion.

Table 5. Perceived Integration of Women's Perspectives in Peacebuilding

Response Category	%
Very effectively	23.6
Somewhat effectively	42.6
Neutral	13.2
Not very effectively	19.4
Not at all effectively	1.2

4.4. Barriers to Women's Participation

The most significant barriers identified in the data are patriarchy, sectarianism, cultural expectations, religiously informed gender norms, and institutional exclusion. Participants repeatedly stated that Lebanon's sectarian political system limits women's access to formal authority. Political and religious leadership remain largely male-dominated, making it difficult for women to enter decision-making spaces.

Patriarchy was one of the most frequently mentioned barriers. One participant stated:

"The central problem in our society is patriarchy. Everything that fights patriarchy strengthens women to move forward." (*Participant 2, interview participant*)

Sectarianism was also identified as a major obstacle because it reinforces communal divisions and prioritises loyalty to religious or political groups over inclusive national participation. One participant explained:

"A primary challenge is the entrenched sectarianism, where religious affiliations often define political and social identities, complicating efforts to build cohesive, cross-sectarian peace initiatives." (*Participant 1, interview participant*)

Another participant similarly described how religious difference can become a source of renewed conflict:

"The country's history of sectarian conflict means that religious differences can easily become a conflict battleground." (*Participant 4, interview participant*)

Participants also noted that women are often viewed through traditional gender roles and are not always taken seriously as leaders, negotiators, or political actors. This limits their ability to move from informal peacebuilding into formal political participation. The findings therefore suggest that women's exclusion is not only cultural, but also institutional and political. Patriarchy restricts women's authority, while sectarianism limits cross-community cooperation and reinforces male-dominated leadership structures.

Table 6: Barriers Limiting Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Barrier	How it affects women's participation
Patriarchy	Restricts women's authority and reinforces traditional gender roles
Sectarianism	Prioritises communal loyalty and limits cross-sectarian collaboration
Cultural expectations	Frames women mainly as caregivers rather than formal leaders
Religious restrictions	Can limit women's access to public religious and political authority
Institutional exclusion	Keeps women outside formal negotiations and decision-making bodies
Lack of resources	Limits women-led peacebuilding initiatives and community projects

4.5. Lessons from Northern Ireland

Participants also identified Northern Ireland as a useful comparative case for Lebanon. The Northern Irish experience demonstrates how women's grassroots activism can be transformed into formal political participation. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was frequently referenced as an example of how women can enter formal negotiations and broaden the peace agenda to include equality, victims' rights, education, social justice, and community development.

One participant emphasised the importance of including women and marginalised groups in formal decision-making:

"The inclusion of women and marginalised groups in negotiations and decision-making processes can enhance the comprehensiveness and legitimacy of peace agreements." (*Participant 1, interview participant*)

Another participant connected the Northern Irish example to the need for social change in Lebanon:

"Changing societal attitudes and the social mentality towards women's roles, as demonstrated through Northern Ireland's efforts, can greatly inspire a peaceful religious community in Lebanon." (*Participant 10, interview participant*)

A further participant stressed the importance of women's political participation and organisation:

"Women should become more involved in political life and form women's associations and seminars that aim for peace." (*Participant 3, interview participant*)

Another participant identified legal and institutional reform as necessary for expanding women's participation:

"Develop and implement policies and legislation that guarantee women's rights and enhance their participation in the decision-making process at all levels." (*Participant 8, interview participant*)

For Lebanon, the most relevant lessons include expanding women's participation in formal peacebuilding, supporting women-led community initiatives, promoting interfaith dialogue, providing resources for peacebuilding projects, and challenging sectarian divisions through inclusive political and social mechanisms.

Table 7: Lessons from Northern Ireland for Women's Peacebuilding in Lebanon

Lesson from Northern Ireland	Relevance for Lebanon
Women's coalition-building	Supports cross-sectarian mobilisation and collective advocacy
Formal participation in negotiations	Shows how women can move from grassroots activism to institutional recognition
Broader peace agenda	Encourages attention to equality, victims' rights, education, and social justice
Cross-community dialogue	Offers a model for interfaith and inter-sectarian engagement
Institutional support	Highlights the need to resource and formalise women's peacebuilding roles

These findings are interpreted below in relation to feminist peacebuilding theory, women's religious agency, and the comparative lessons that may be drawn from Northern Ireland.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Lebanese women are already active participants in peacebuilding, although their contributions remain concentrated within informal and community-based spaces rather than formal political and peacebuilding institutions. Across both the interviews and survey responses, women were consistently identified as contributors to mediation, community dialogue, advocacy, education, social networking, and grassroots reconciliation initiatives. These findings support feminist peacebuilding scholarship, which argues that women's contributions to peace are frequently located outside formal political structures while remaining essential to social cohesion, reconciliation, and conflict transformation (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002; Paffenholz, 2015).

More importantly, the combination of qualitative and quantitative findings reveals a significant tension between social recognition and institutional participation. While survey respondents broadly acknowledged women's positive contribution to peacebuilding and strongly supported greater inclusion of women in formal negotiations, interview participants repeatedly described barriers that continue to restrict women's access to decision-making spaces. This suggests that the principal challenge is not a lack of public recognition of women's peacebuilding role, but rather the persistence of institutional arrangements that limit women's political influence. The findings therefore point to a disconnect between societal attitudes and political opportunity structures in Lebanon. Women are recognised as peacebuilders within communities, yet this recognition is rarely translated into formal authority or representation.

This tension contributes to broader feminist debates concerning the relationship between informal and formal peacebuilding. Existing scholarship often distinguishes between grassroots participation and institutional participation, but the Lebanese case suggests that movement between these spheres is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Women's community-based peacebuilding activities generate social legitimacy and

local influence; however, patriarchal institutions, sectarian power-sharing arrangements, and male-dominated political networks continue to restrict access to formal leadership positions. The findings therefore support Enloe's (2004) critique of traditional peacebuilding frameworks, which frequently privilege elite political actors while overlooking the significance of grassroots contributions. They also reinforce Okin's (1989) argument that exclusion from public decision-making cannot be separated from broader social and institutional inequalities.

The findings further demonstrate that women's peacebuilding experiences in Lebanon are shaped by the intersection of gender, religion, and sectarian politics. Rather than operating within a neutral social environment, women navigate multiple and overlapping structures of authority that influence opportunities for participation. Interview participants frequently described patriarchal norms, religious authority structures, and sectarian political arrangements as interconnected barriers to women's inclusion. This suggests that women's exclusion cannot be understood solely through gender analysis. Instead, participation is shaped by the interaction between gender relations, religious institutions, and the confessional political system that structures political power in Lebanon. The findings therefore support intersectional approaches that view gender inequalities as embedded within wider political, cultural, and institutional systems.

At the same time, the findings challenge simplistic assumptions that religion functions only as an obstacle to women's participation. Both the qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest a more complex relationship. Participants frequently identified religious institutions and interpretations as reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting women's leadership opportunities. However, they also described religion as a source of moral authority, community trust, social legitimacy, and opportunities for dialogue. Religion therefore appears to function simultaneously as both a constraint and a resource. This finding supports Wadud's (1999) argument that religious traditions can be interpreted in ways that support gender justice, while also reflecting Mahmood's (2005) observation that women's agency may emerge through engagement with religious structures rather than exclusively through resistance to them. The findings suggest that efforts to strengthen women's participation in peacebuilding are likely to be more effective when they engage constructively with religious actors and institutions rather than treating religion as inherently incompatible with gender inclusion.

A particularly important contribution of this study concerns the role of informal influence in peacebuilding. Participants repeatedly described women exercising influence through trust-building, persuasion, social relationships, community engagement, and moral credibility rather than through formal political authority. This suggests that women's peacebuilding influence often operates through mechanisms that are less visible within conventional political analyses. In this sense, women's

peacebuilding activities can be understood as a form of social and relational power that contributes to reconciliation and conflict transformation despite limited access to formal institutions. Importantly, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that women are inherently more peaceful, empathetic, or effective mediators than men. Rather, participants frequently associated women with these roles because of their social experiences, community responsibilities, and patterns of engagement within Lebanese society. The findings therefore highlight how social position and lived experience can shape opportunities for peacebuilding participation.

The comparison with Northern Ireland provides additional analytical insight into the conditions under which women's grassroots peacebuilding can become institutionalised. While both Lebanon and Northern Ireland experienced conflict shaped by identity divisions and patriarchal political structures, the mechanisms through which women gained influence differed significantly. In Northern Ireland, women successfully expanded their political influence through coalition-building, cross-community mobilisation, and direct engagement with formal peace negotiations. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition transformed grassroots activism into institutional participation by creating a political platform that transcended existing communal divisions and broadened the peace agenda to include issues such as equality, victims' rights, education, and community development (McWilliams, 1997; Porter, 2003).

The Lebanese findings suggest a different political context. Interview participants repeatedly identified sectarian affiliation as a major obstacle to collective mobilisation and formal participation. Consequently, the principal lesson from Northern Ireland is not simply that women should participate more actively in peacebuilding, but that institutional pathways must exist through which grassroots activism can be translated into formal political influence. The comparison therefore highlights differences in political opportunity structures rather than differences in women's capacities or commitment to peacebuilding. Whereas Northern Ireland's peace process created formal openings for women's participation, Lebanon's confessional political system continues to channel political influence through sectarian power-sharing arrangements that often reinforce existing elite structures. The most transferable lessons therefore relate to coalition-building, cross-sectarian mobilisation, and institutional access rather than direct replication of the Northern Irish model.

Taken together, the findings reveal a central paradox. Lebanese women are socially active and widely recognised as contributors to peacebuilding, yet they remain institutionally marginalised. The evidence suggests that the challenge facing women's peacebuilding in Lebanon is not whether women contribute to reconciliation and conflict transformation, but whether existing political and institutional structures are capable of incorporating those contributions into formal decision-making processes. If peacebuilding continues to be dominated by established political and religious elites,

opportunities for more inclusive forms of reconciliation may remain limited. The findings therefore suggest that sustainable peacebuilding requires not only support for women's grassroots initiatives but also reforms that expand women's access to political negotiations, interfaith dialogue platforms, religious institutions, and other formal decision-making arenas.

Finally, the study contributes to feminist peacebuilding scholarship by demonstrating that the relationship between grassroots and formal peacebuilding is significantly shaped by sectarian political structures. The Lebanese case suggests that women's participation is influenced not only by gender inequalities but also by the interaction between religion, sectarianism, and institutional design. This finding extends existing feminist peacebuilding research by highlighting the importance of analysing women's participation through an intersectional framework that incorporates political, religious, and institutional dimensions simultaneously. Such an approach may provide a more comprehensive understanding of both the opportunities and constraints shaping women's peacebuilding roles in divided societies.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study examined the role of women in peacebuilding in Lebanon, focusing on the intersection of religion, gender, sectarianism, and political participation. The study finds that Lebanese women contribute significantly to peacebuilding through grassroots mediation, advocacy, education, community engagement, and faith-based initiatives, yet their contributions remain insufficiently represented within formal political and religious decision-making structures. The findings show that Lebanese women play a crucial role in grassroots peacebuilding through informal mediation, advocacy, education, social networking, faith-based engagement, and community leadership. However, their contributions remain under-recognised and insufficiently formalised within political and religious decision-making structures.

The study demonstrates that women's peacebuilding in Lebanon is shaped by both opportunity and constraint. On the one hand, women use religious and community networks to promote dialogue, tolerance, reconciliation, and social cohesion. On the other hand, their formal participation is limited by patriarchal norms, sectarian politics, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers. The survey and interview findings consistently indicate that women are widely recognised as contributors to peacebuilding at the community level, while remaining underrepresented in formal peace and governance processes. The comparison with Northern Ireland provides useful lessons. Women's activism in Northern Ireland shows that grassroots peacebuilding can become formally recognised when women organise collectively, build cross-community coalitions, and gain access to political negotiations. While Lebanon's context is different, this example highlights the importance of institutionalising women's

participation and ensuring that peacebuilding agendas include equality, social justice, victims' rights, education, and community development.

Based on the findings, the study advances a set of policy-oriented recommendations aimed at strengthening women's role in peacebuilding in Lebanon. At the institutional level, women's participation should move beyond informal recognition and be formally embedded within reconciliation forums, interfaith dialogue platforms, religious councils, and peace-related negotiations. Such inclusion requires the reform of legal and institutional structures that continue to restrict women's political participation, particularly those shaped by discriminatory practices and male-dominated decision-making mechanisms.

At the community level, greater financial, technical, and institutional support should be directed toward women-led grassroots initiatives, including NGOs, local mediation committees, and community-based peacebuilding projects. These initiatives constitute important spaces through which women already contribute to dialogue, reconciliation, and social cohesion. The findings also indicate the need to strengthen women's role in interfaith and cross-sectarian dialogue, especially in a context where sectarian identities continue to shape political and social relations. Women should therefore be supported as key actors in initiatives that challenge communal divisions and promote national cohesion.

The findings further suggest the importance of sustained investment in capacity-building programmes, particularly in mediation, negotiation, leadership, religious literacy, and conflict-resolution skills. In parallel, religious leaders should be constructively engaged to support women's participation and promote interpretations of religion that emphasise peace, justice, equality, and human dignity. Finally, public recognition of women peacebuilders should be expanded through media, education, and public institutions. Increasing the visibility of women's peacebuilding contributions may help challenge gender stereotypes, normalise women's leadership, and encourage broader participation in peacebuilding initiatives.

This study is subject to several limitations. The survey sample was not nationally representative and was heavily concentrated among younger respondents. In addition, the use of purposive and snowball sampling may have limited the diversity of perspectives captured. The Northern Ireland comparison was based on secondary analysis rather than original fieldwork and therefore serves as an analytical rather than directly comparable case. Future research could employ nationally representative surveys, expand comparative analysis to additional post-conflict societies, and examine the experiences of women peacebuilders across different Lebanese regions and religious communities.

In conclusion, Lebanese women are not peripheral to peacebuilding; they are already active agents of reconciliation and social transformation. The central challenge

identified by this study is not whether women contribute to peacebuilding, but how their contributions can be translated into greater institutional recognition and participation. The findings suggest that more inclusive peacebuilding processes—those that incorporate women’s voices, experiences, and leadership alongside existing political and religious actors—may contribute to broader efforts toward reconciliation and social cohesion in Lebanon.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to all interviewees and survey respondents who generously contributed their time, experiences, and perspectives to this study. Their participation and insights were invaluable in developing a deeper understanding of women’s roles in peacebuilding in Lebanon. The author also acknowledges the individuals, professional networks, and community organisations that assisted in facilitating participant recruitment and the distribution of the survey.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee at Glasgow Caledonian University prior to the commencement of data collection [approval reference number, if applicable]. Participation in the semi-structured interviews and survey was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were provided with information concerning the purpose of the research, the intended use of the data, their rights as research participants, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting processes.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, the development of the research instruments, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript. She critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and accepts full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

CRedit author statement: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Validation, Software, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing, Visualization, and Project Administration.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research reported in this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain information obtained from human participants and are subject to confidentiality, privacy, and ethical restrictions. Anonymised data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request, subject to approval under the applicable ethical and data-protection requirements. The semi-structured interview questions and survey questionnaire used in the study are included in the appendices to the article.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you consider religion an instrument of peace?
2. Do you think religion can play an important role in conflict resolution?
3. Do you believe religion can contribute to economic development?
4. Do you agree that Lebanon is a religious state?
5. Would a secular Lebanon lead to national harmony and development?
6. Do you think parochialism is a major problem in Lebanon?
7. Do you agree that multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies would lead to progress and harmony?
8. To what extent have religions traditionally played a vital role in education, social welfare, charitable work, and humanitarian relief?
9. Do you agree that religious envoys, mediators, and leaders can play a major role in conflict resolution in various countries around the world?
10. How can women be empowered to strengthen their role in peacebuilding?
11. How can efforts to empower women in peacebuilding be strengthened moving forward?

12. Have you been involved in any peacebuilding initiatives or activities that incorporate religious or cultural elements? If so, could you describe your role and contributions?
13. How do you perceive the role of women in peacebuilding efforts in your community? Are there specific challenges or barriers that women face in these roles?
14. What lessons do you think Lebanon could learn from the peace process in Northern Ireland?
15. Are there specific challenges or opportunities related to religion's role in peacebuilding that you believe are unique to Lebanon?

Table A1: Semi-Structured Interview Participant Categories

Participant category	Number
Politicians from different sectarian/political backgrounds	7
Religious leaders	4
Women working in peacebuilding NGOs	2
University instructors	2
Representative from women's empowerment organisation	1
Women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds	6
Total	22

Appendix B: Survey Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender:
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Prefer not to say
 - ☐ Other: _____
2. Age group:
 - ☐ 18–24
 - ☐ 25–34
 - ☐ 35–44
 - ☐ 45–54
 - ☐ 55 and above
3. Religious affiliation:
 - ☐ Muslim
 - ☐ Christian

- ☐ Druze
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say
4. Place of residence:
- ☐ Beirut
- ☐ Mount Lebanon
- ☐ North Lebanon
- ☐ South Lebanon
- ☐ Bekaa
- ☐ Other: _____
5. Educational level:
- ☐ Secondary education
- ☐ Undergraduate degree
- ☐ Postgraduate degree
- ☐ Other: _____
6. Are you involved in any peacebuilding, community, religious, educational, or NGO-related activity?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Section 2: Religion and Peacebuilding

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

1. Religion can be used as an instrument of peace.
2. Religion can play an important role in conflict resolution.
3. Religious leaders can contribute positively to peacebuilding in Lebanon.
4. Religious institutions can promote interfaith dialogue and reconciliation.
5. Religion in Lebanon can sometimes reinforce sectarian division.
6. Religious values such as forgiveness, compassion, justice, and tolerance can support peacebuilding.

7. Politicians sometimes use religion in ways that increase division rather than peace.

8. Interfaith dialogue is important for reducing sectarian tension in Lebanon.

Section 3: Women's Role in Peacebuilding

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

1. Women play an important role in peacebuilding in Lebanon.
2. Women contribute to peacebuilding through grassroots activism and community engagement.
3. Women often act as informal mediators within families and communities.
4. Women's emotional intelligence and empathy can support conflict resolution.
5. Women contribute to peacebuilding through education and raising awareness.
6. Women's participation in peacebuilding can strengthen social cohesion.
7. Women's involvement in formal peace negotiations would contribute to more sustainable peace.
8. Women should be more represented in political and religious peacebuilding initiatives.

Section 4: Barriers to Women's Participation

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

1. Patriarchal social norms limit women's participation in peacebuilding.
2. Sectarian politics restrict women's opportunities for political participation.
3. Cultural expectations prevent women from taking leadership roles in peacebuilding.
4. Religious interpretations can sometimes limit women's public participation.
5. Women's contributions to peacebuilding are often under-recognised.
6. Women lack sufficient access to resources and funding for peacebuilding initiatives.
7. Women are often excluded from formal political negotiations.
8. Legal and institutional reforms are needed to strengthen women's participation in peacebuilding.

Section 5: Lessons from Northern Ireland

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

1. Lebanon can learn from Northern Ireland's peace process.
2. Women's participation in Northern Ireland offers useful lessons for Lebanon.
3. Cross-community dialogue is important for peacebuilding in divided societies.
4. Women's coalitions and networks can strengthen peacebuilding efforts.
5. Peace processes should include marginalised groups, including women.
6. International support can help strengthen women-led peacebuilding initiatives.