

The Struggle of Lebanese Teacher Unions in a Neoliberal Period

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Teacher unions worldwide are being criticized for disregarding their responsibility as professionals towards education and students. Critics have claimed that teacher unions tend to protect incompetent teachers, place their own needs and interests above their students, and continuously demand for financial increases even when there is more urgency to elevate teacher professionalism and improve teacher quality. This statement does not take into consideration the political, social and economic aspects that influence unions' decisions. Therefore, this study utilizes a qualitative research design, specifically a grounded theory approach to investigate the challenges facing teacher unions in Lebanon from the perspective of union leaders and union members. Data was collected from seventeen public school union leaders and twenty-one teachers. Findings have revealed that teacher unions have assumed a social justice role limited to raising awareness. There are organizational, legal, political, educational, social, and economic barriers that prevent teacher unions in Lebanon from assuming a more active role as a union.</i></p>	<p>Article History: <i>Received</i> May, 14, 2019 <i>Accepted</i> December, 28, 2019</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Teacher unions, Teacher agency, Labour relations, Lebanon, union memberships, Public schools, Labour unions, teachers</i></p>

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Introduction

Teacher unions are accused of obstructing reform initiatives and criticized for disregarding their responsibilities as professionals towards education and students (Bascia & Osmond, 2013). Critics have claimed that teacher unions tend to protect incompetent teachers, place their own needs and interests above their students, and continuously demand for financial increases even when there is more urgency to elevate teacher professionalism and improve teacher quality (Moe, 2011). There are also concerns about the extent of influence that teacher unions have on schools and policies. Collective bargaining rights have granted unions much power over decisions related to teacher salaries and working conditions (Strunk, 2011), but there are conflicting views about the impact of unions on teachers, schools and students (Carini, 2002; Cowen & Strunk, 2015; Hanushek, 2006; Lovenheim, 2009; Stevenson, 2003). Also, teacher unions in the Global North are among the largest labor unions and have mandatory union membership fees making them influential actors in policy with the financial means to lobby in politics. However, teacher unions also have “less allies and are politically isolated” because of this power (Weiner, 2012, p. 11). Thus, solely highlighting the power that teacher unions hold is inadequate without understanding their purpose, goals, perceptions and the challenges that affect their decisions.

Lebanese teacher unions are also perceived to be self-serving associations (El-Amine, 1994). This perception is partially influenced by the image and the discourse that the media presents about teacher unions. It was visible in 2012 when a strike was called by the teachers’ Union Coordination Committee (UCC), where thousands of teachers marched the streets demanding a salary scale increase of



121%, based on the inflation increase since 1996 (Bou Khater, 2015). Although the demand is a long-overdue right, the media described it as a “fever” (Albawaba, 2012) that “will cripple entire Lebanon” (Aboulmona, 2013).

The politicization of teacher unions became evident after 2014 when the UCC resorted to boycotting the invigilation of the official exams demanding a salary scale increase. The Minister of Education requested that the UCC halt their strike and return to invigilating exams, assuring them that if the salary increase was not passed, they can then boycott the corrections of the exams (Lakkis, 2014). However, with the political instability and the presidential void, political leaders hardly convened in parliament, which resulted in the failure to pass the salary increase law. As a result, teachers returned to protesting, and the Minister of Education issued passing certificates to all students. Teachers saw the automatic promotion of all students as a dire decision jeopardizing students’ academic future and the quality of education (Lakkis, 2014). Teachers blamed their union leadership for the Minister’s decision and shifted their trust to their political parties representatives (“Political Parties Sweep,” 2015).

This paper examines Lebanese teacher unions’ challenges from the perspective of union leaders and union members. The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the challenges that teacher unions are facing in the neoliberal period?
2. What kind of strategies do teacher unions use to address these challenges?

Most of the Western literature has focused on the political arena, examining teacher union-government relations (Bascia, 2016; Bascia & Osmond, 2013), new unionism models and roles (Poole,

2001; Stevenson, 2015), and the political influence that the union possesses (Flavin & Hartney, 2015). However, limited studies examine internal challenges that lead to decrease in union density and the reasons for union ineffectiveness. Our study intends to capture these reasons from an internal perspective of union leaders and union members. In addition, there is a gap in Arab literature about labor unions and teacher unions in particular. Studies about labor unions emerged mainly after Arab Spring with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions that revealed a significant role for union in reforms. For example, Netterstrom (2016) that was conducted in Tunisia concluded that Arab labor unions are not simply “empty shells” or submissive unions. This research showed that Tunisian union leaders in Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) used a compliance-resistance strategy to appear submissive to Ben Ali’s regime, but was in fact protecting their members and sending them signals of when to protest. This finding also emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and taking into consideration the perception of union leaders before reaching a conclusion. Moreover, research on teacher unions in Lebanon is rare. There seems to be only one empirical study conducted by Samaha (2006) about teacher unions which revealed that there is a dichotomy in having a union consciousness and a professional consciousness among Lebanese teachers. Yet, this quantitative study did not take into consideration the perspective of union leaders in particular.

Our study is significant for participating union leaders since they can improve their strategies to attain their goals and better represent their members. Policymakers in Lebanon can also understand how to build a more effective relationship with teacher unions to improve education. Also, researchers can be informed



about factors that influence union membership and density that they could take into consideration in their own studies.

Unionism, Unionization, and Education Reform

The first unionism model used by teacher unions in many countries was a meet and confer method, which was closer to “begging and deferring” for teacher demands and teacher rights during meetings with policymakers (Bascia, 2009). However, during the 1960s and 1970s, teacher unions in many states in the US and in Canada protested and were able to attain collective bargaining rights (Carlson, 1992). The power of teacher unions in collective bargaining, however, was limited to deliberating mainly on salaries, benefits, and working conditions. Teacher unions were not permitted to participate in educational policies. After teacher unions were criticized for not being active in improving education (Lieberman, 2000), they sought new unionism models that would improve teacher professionalism and education quality such as peer assistance and review (PAR) (Sawchuk, 2009).

Teacher unions have sought opportunities to collaborate with the government and expand their role in decision-making on education reform projects (Bascia & Osmond, 2012). However, teacher unions faced challenges in assuming this new role because of history of conflicts and power struggle (Bascia, 2012). Teacher unions have also stood strongly against neoliberal policies that followed free market rule. Neoliberalism reduces government intervention to promote economic growth; it also increases social inequality. In Ostry et al. (2016), International Monetary Fund researchers have recognized that some policies such as capital account liberalization and fiscal consolidation have been found to raise inequality,

economic volatility and the risk of economic crisis. In addition, some of the education reform policies in US that were proposed targeted teacher salaries and public education such as linking teacher evaluation to teacher pay and student performance, supporting and increasing charter schools, issuing school vouchers for parental school choice which would decrease the funding for public education. This placed National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers on the opposing end of the spectrum (Hartney & Flavin, 2011). There are also neoliberal programs that are promoting precarious work such as Teach for America that permits fresh new graduates to become precarious teachers for about two years without having the pedagogical skills to teach (Barnard, 2019; Bascia, 2009). Some school administrators are using Teach for America to replace permanent unionized teachers (Barnard, 2019). In Ontario, a Canadian province that Pasi Sahlberg refers to as a “highway to heaven” in education (Kennedy, 2018), teacher unions are confronting the Progressive Conservative government’s budget cuts on educational programs and resources that would lead to teacher dismissals and class size increases (Chen, 2019). This province was among top-scoring states on PISA test as a result of many factors, including a strong union and a good government-union relationship that was able to create a collaborative effort to improve student outcome and wellbeing and teachers’ professionalism (Bascia, 2013).

Governments that viewed teacher unions as partners have achieved successful reforms. Bascia and Osmond (2012) have shown how Alberta Teachers Federation chose to support the government in professional learning by creating a resource manual and providing training for school council participants. Another example is Ontario Teachers’ Federation when they partnered with the Liberal government in 2007 to offer experienced teachers professional



development through a project called Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) (Lieberman et al., 2017). TLLP was a bottom-up approach in professional development that catered to the needs of teachers and has shown to improve instructional practices, teachers' self-efficacy, communication, collaboration, research skills, and management skills (Lieberman et al., 2017).

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts one of the new unionism models called social justice unionism as described by Peterson (1999), a model constructed by and for teacher unions to address organizational, social, economic, educational-related and political barriers. This model incorporates an aspect of the traditional model of unionism that emphasizes the importance of defending the rights of union members while also fighting for the rights and needs of the broader community including students. Bascia (2016) asserts that teacher conditions indirectly reflect on teachers and student learning. Thus, Bascia states, "when teachers can teach well, students have a better chance of learning" (2016, p. 162).

Teacher unions must expand on their traditional role to become more involved in improving the teaching profession and education (Peterson, 1999). Hence, the second component of social justice unionism emerges from professional unionism, which urges teachers to go beyond the economic and social interests and bargain on educational aspects and improve teachers' professionalism. Bascia (2016) reveals the struggle of teacher unions in developed and developing countries with school budget cuts is related not only to teacher salaries but also to school supplies, professional development

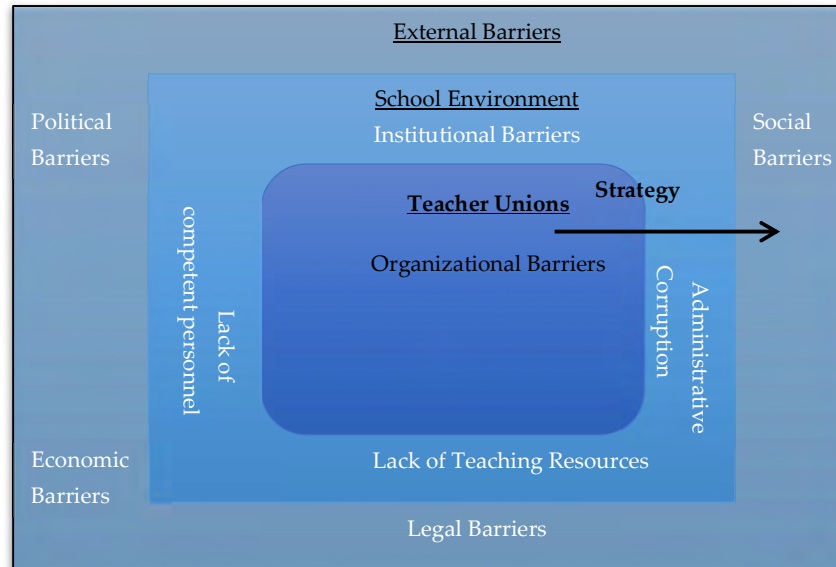
programs, and social services. Teacher unions in these cases used their power to maintain teacher quality.

The most important part of social justice unionism stems from the political lens. Using the social justice unionism model in Lebanon, the union would work on addressing social justice issues that occur in the classroom and in society. In Lebanon, sectarianism has been and continues to be the main cause of Lebanese internal conflicts. Sectarianism is engraved in the countries policies through the power-sharing agreement that is reinforced in Taif Accord of 1989, which ended the Lebanese Civil War (Karam, 2017). Using this model can help identify if teacher unions in Lebanon are playing a social justice role. In addition, the social justice unionism model emphasizes the importance of involving rank-and-file members in leading the union and building external alliances with the community to strengthen the union's stance.

This conceptual framework below was constructed from literature in examining the challenges facing teacher unions. We chose social justice unionism as a comprehensive model that can address union challenges. The framework below portrays the dynamics between teacher unions and their environment.

Figure 1.

The dynamics between teacher unions and their environment



Teacher Unions in the Context of Lebanon

There are three teacher unions in Lebanon: the Teacher Syndicate of Lebanon, the Public Primary School Teachers League, and the Public Secondary School Teachers League. The history of these unions can best be described as a progressive movement where the primary purpose of teacher unions was to improve teachers' professional status. However, despite their work, these Lebanese unions struggled to establish their identities and reinforce their presence.

Teachers in private schools along with school principals attempted to form a union since 1910 and succeeded in 1938 during the French mandate. The private school teacher unions' aim was to

raise teachers' economic, social, and professional status and improve education (Samaha, 2006). However, the sectarian and political conflicts in the country have negatively reflected on the union leadership, particularly in their union elections, collaboration, and decision-making. In fact, in 1971, disagreement among union leaders on the election results and on the allocation of union positions according to sectarian quotas caused a split in the union ("Teacher Syndicate of Lebanon," 2018). This conflict was resolved in 1992, reunifying the union under what is today called Teacher Syndicate of Lebanon.

Contrarily, public school teachers struggled to form a union because similar to any public work setting, the government is believed to be just towards its employees. Public primary school teachers were the first to demand to improve their working conditions because they felt marginalized compared to other teachers in public and private schools. They demanded a raise in wages, an increase in the rate of promotion, and a decrease of years of service (Samaha, 2006). The persistence of elementary teachers led them to get two promotion scales and a proportionate raise on their salaries. In addition, in 1972, Decree No. 335 was issued that granted primary teachers in public schools the right to become members of a league called Public Primary School Teachers League. This league had a social and cultural orientation and was not allowed to act as a union. Its membership is mandatory for all elementary public school teachers but no dues are paid to the league for its services. Moreover, the law compelled the formation of five regional leagues, each in one of the five governorates of Lebanon. The government's decision to form five leagues instead of one united league impeded the leagues' work, particularly in decision-making. However, in 2009, the Public



Primary School Teachers League was finally able to unify its five leagues under one based on Decree No. 1553.

Subsequently, Public Secondary School Teachers League was established in November 25, 1980 through Decree No. 871. This decree granted the establishment of a unified union that was less restrictive on the league activities. The decree did not include statements that banned teachers' strikes. This flexibility was due to the on-going Lebanese Civil War, which weakened the government's control over the public sector (Samaha, 2006). The Public Secondary School Teacher League held their first strike in 1966, when the government differentiated between teaching and other prestigious professions, whom were granted special remunerations. The strikes resulted in special pay remuneration and a promotion of two grade levels every two years (Samaha, 2006).

One of the key challenges faced by teacher unions in Lebanon was the heavy-handed interference of political parties. During protests, escalations often occurred that led to injuries and sometimes even death and often resulted in retaliatory measures made by the government. One of these measures included issuance of Decrees No. 4820 and 4824, which dismissed 309 teachers and assigned 252 new teachers to replace them in 1973 (Samaha, 2006). Eleven months after being terminated from their jobs, conducting many strikes, and communicating with various political and religious leaders, teachers were reassigned to their jobs (Samaha, 2006). This and similar crisis, marked the history of teacher unionism and helped them establish negotiation tactics to achieve their demands.

Method

This study follows an exploratory qualitative approach and adopts a constructivist paradigm, which states that the world is constructed by people who perceive it through “human action, interaction, and emotional responses that people have to events and problems they encounter” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 6). This study also follows the grounded theory guidelines that were originally constructed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and were further built on by Charmaz (2006).

For this study, thirty-eight participants were selected, including seventeen union leaders from the executive committee of Public Primary School Teachers League and Public Secondary School Teachers League and twenty-one union members. Of the participants, seventeen were female and twenty-one were male. The leaders in the union were chosen based on their availability and consent to be interviewed.

Table 1.

Distribution of Union Leaders

	Public Primary School Teachers League	Public Secondary School Teachers League
Total number of committee members	18 (16 Male, 2 Female)	18 (16 Male, 2 Female)
Sample of participants	8 (8 Male, 0 Female)	9 (8 Male, 1 Female)

Figure 2.

Age of union leaders

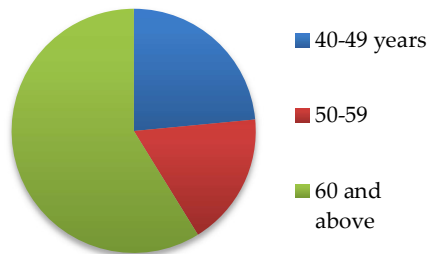
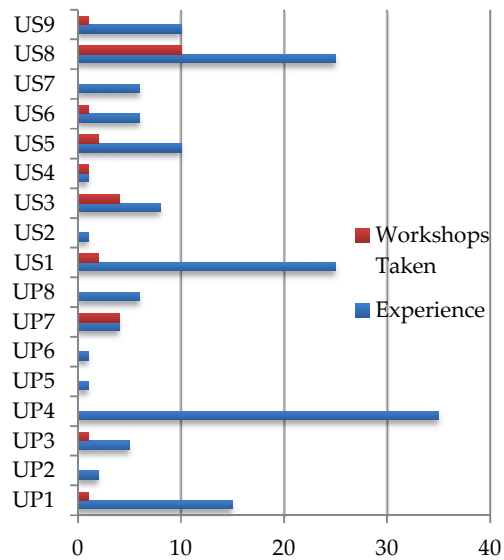


Figure 3.

Experience and training of union leaders



Union members were chosen from Greater Beirut Area for convenience purposes and were divided between active members in the leagues and inactive members. Union members were considered active members if they “served on union committees or were building representatives, had attended at least five union meetings in a year, engaged in political action and promoted union issues in their buildings or community” (Popiel, 2010, p. 12). Participants in this research also included contractual teachers. Contractual teachers belong to one of the two committees, the Public Primary School Contractors Committee or the Public Secondary School Contractors Committee. Since their leagues are not officially recongnized, their demands are represented by the public school leagues. Contractual teachers make up around 33% of the teaching body in the public sector (El-Amine, 2012) and therefore their responses were taken into consideration.

Table 2.

Distribution of Union Members

	Active Members		Inactive Members	
Sample of participants	12		9	
	Elementary & Intermediate	Secondary	Elementary & Intermediate	Secondary
Number of Teachers	7	5	5	4
Males/Females	6/1	2/3	5/0	3/1
Full-timers/Contractual	7/0	4/1	3/2	3/1



The primary union leaders were coded UP and the secondary union leaders were coded US for confidentiality purposes. The primary teachers were coded AP and the secondary were coded AS. As for inactive members, they were coded IP for primary and IS for secondary teachers.

Data were collected through three methods: formal field interviews, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews. A formal field interview is a type of group interview where a researcher meets two or more participants in a field setting. The interview used a semi-structured format where the researcher takes a directive role (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Table 3 below illustrates the method used for data collection with each group of participants. Data were collected first from focus groups, but because we could not hold focus groups with primary union leaders and active members, we resorted to semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked about the purpose of teacher unions, responsibilities or tasks that are required of their union, and possible setbacks that block the union from achieving success, as well as their opinion regarding the union's ability to be part of any education improvement acts, in school or outside of it.

Table 3.
Data Collection Method

Participants	Quantity	Method for Data Collection
Primary Union Leaders	8	Semi-Structured Interviews
Secondary Union Leaders	9	Two Methods (2 Semi-Structured Interviews with Current and Past Presidents; 1 Focus Group with 8 leaders)
Primary Active Members	7	Two Methods (5 Semi-Structured Interviews; 1 Field Group Interview)
Secondary Active Members	5	Two Methods (3 Semi-Structured Interviews; 1 Field Group Interview)
Inactive Members	9	One Focus Group (3 Secondary, 6 Primary)

This study used constant comparative as a method for analysis of data collection and followed the procedural guidelines of the grounded theory methodology as outlined by Charmaz (2006). Data collected from focus groups and interviews were transcribed into codes and underwent four levels of analysis: 1) initial coding, 2) focused coding, 3) axial coding, and 4) theoretical coding. We analysed data from focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and several themes emerged. For member check and triangulation purposes, we requested from a number of participants in each group to comment on the results. Additionally, we used discourse analysis to analyse union artefacts, such as the internal policies as well as laws and decrees related to the two public schools teacher unions.

During data collection and data analysis, we made sure to use strategies to legitimize the findings of the study and ensure quality



was provided in the research. For transferability, this research is made to ensure a proper detailed description of the data, a step-by-step procedure, and reflections to allow for comparison to take place. For dependability, we specified the research design and selection of the sample and described the setting, the data collection tools, data collection and data analysis procedures, and any detail or limitation that might affect the study. For confirmability, we used triangulation to further validate the data collected and bring forth more clarity and understanding of the responses of participants.

Results

This section presents the challenges facing teacher unions that were identified from the perspective of union leaders, active union members, and inactive union members and from the analysis of union documents and policies followed by the strategies that teacher unions in Lebanon have used.

Challenges Facing Teacher Unions

These barriers fall under five general dimensions: social and economic barriers, organizational barriers, legal barriers, education-related barriers, and political barriers. Afterward, we present the strategies that public teacher unions used to achieve their objectives. We present only themes that we thought were significant for discussion.

Table 4.
Themes of Challenges Facing Teacher Unions

Themes	Total Union Leaders (out of 17)	Total Active Union Members (out of 12)	Total Inactive Union Members (out of 9)
Social and Economic Barriers			
Low Salaries	9	5	0
Decrease in Teachers' Benefits	3	3	0
Organizational Barriers			
Authoritarian decisions imposed by the Minister of Education	2	2	0
Low morale and lack of creative tactics	11	5	9
Lack of unity among union members	2	5	0
Lack of supportive conditions needed to facilitate union work	2	4	0
Excessive loyalty of union leaders and members to political parties	3	10	9
Legal Barriers			
Lack of legal union recognition	11	7	0
Punitive decrees against unionizing	3	3	0
Education-related Barriers			
Teaching as a low status profession	3	1	0
Acute organizational dysfunctions	1	3	9
Political interferences in education	17	9	9
Political Barriers			
Manipulation of the public perceptions about teacher unions	2	2	0
Lack of union participation in education policy	11	3	0
Influence of international development agencies on education policy	1	4	0



Social and Economic Barriers

Participants reported the challenges related to social and economic barriers. These challenges include two main issues: low salaries and a decrease in teachers' benefits. Union leaders and active members also considered the government's attempt to reduce teacher benefits as a key challenge that has shaped the union work. The former president notes:

We have faced a huge attack on our previously attained benefits. For our retirement, they removed 15% [they get paid only 85% of their salaries]. In cooperatives for civil servants, teachers would try to benefit from the coverage, but we receive fewer services.

Many active members conquered and related that the attempt to remove teachers' benefits has made union members seek new ways to protect their rights. A secondary active union member (AS1) pointed out:

We have received 6 scale levels... This increase differentiates us from administrators... Today, when they [government] placed a draft of the salary and scale increase, they removed 60%. All of the strikes and demonstrations that took place, from 2000 until now, were to preserve our previously acquired rights, whether monetary or motivational.

Organizational Barriers

Teacher unions face organizational constraints mainly, authoritarian decisions imposed by the Minister of Education, low morale and lack of creative tactics, absence of unity among union members and supportive conditions needed to facilitate union work, and excessive loyalty of union leaders and union members to political parties. Below is one of the union's organizational charts created from analyzing internal documents and decrees.

Authoritarian decisions imposed by the Minister of Education

Union leaders and active union members shared how the decrees that established public school teacher unions granted the Minister of Education power over the unions. The union documents and decrees indicated that the Minister of Education is considered to be an honorary president of the leagues and is granted authority through legislative Decrees 871 and 1553 to limit the work of the leagues administrations. Additionally, the Minister has the power to dissolve the executive committees of the two leagues if any of the following cases take place: if the leagues are unable to perform their tasks in accordance to decrees, if the leagues are harming the public interest, or if the leagues do not perform activities that benefit teachers or have stopped conducting activities for three consecutive years.

A primary union leader (UP3) explained, "this league is under the jurisdiction of the Minister: if he decides to eradicate it, he can." Union leader UP6 added that this power over teacher unions limits them in decisions that they can make, "If we decided to do something and the Minister of Education and his team do not approve, then nothing happens."

Figure 4.

Public Primary School Teacher League's Organizational Chart

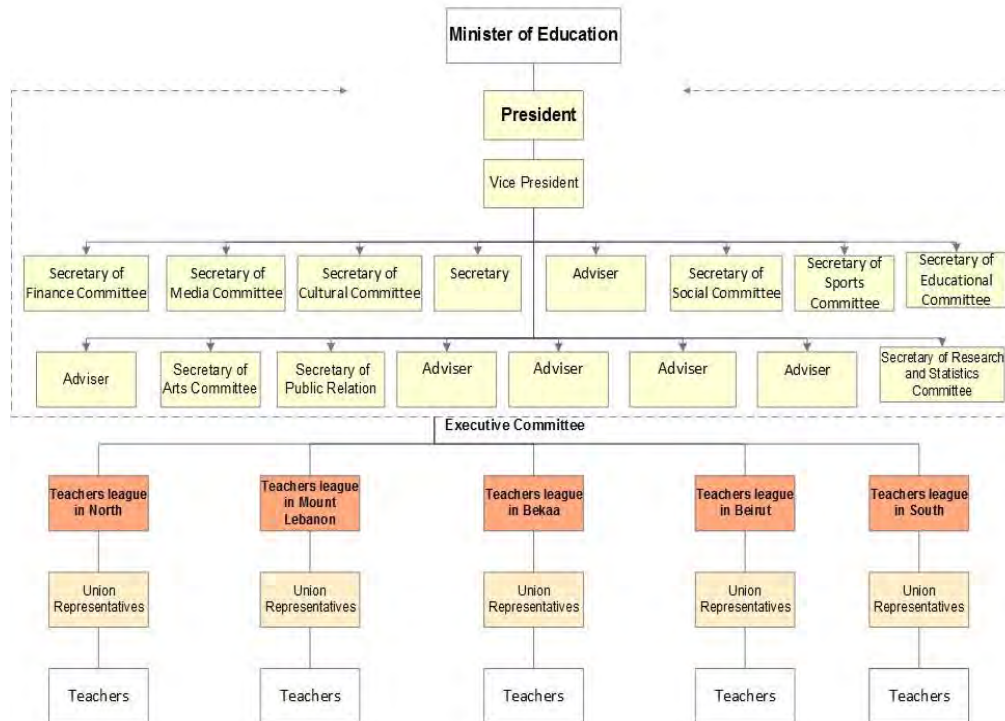
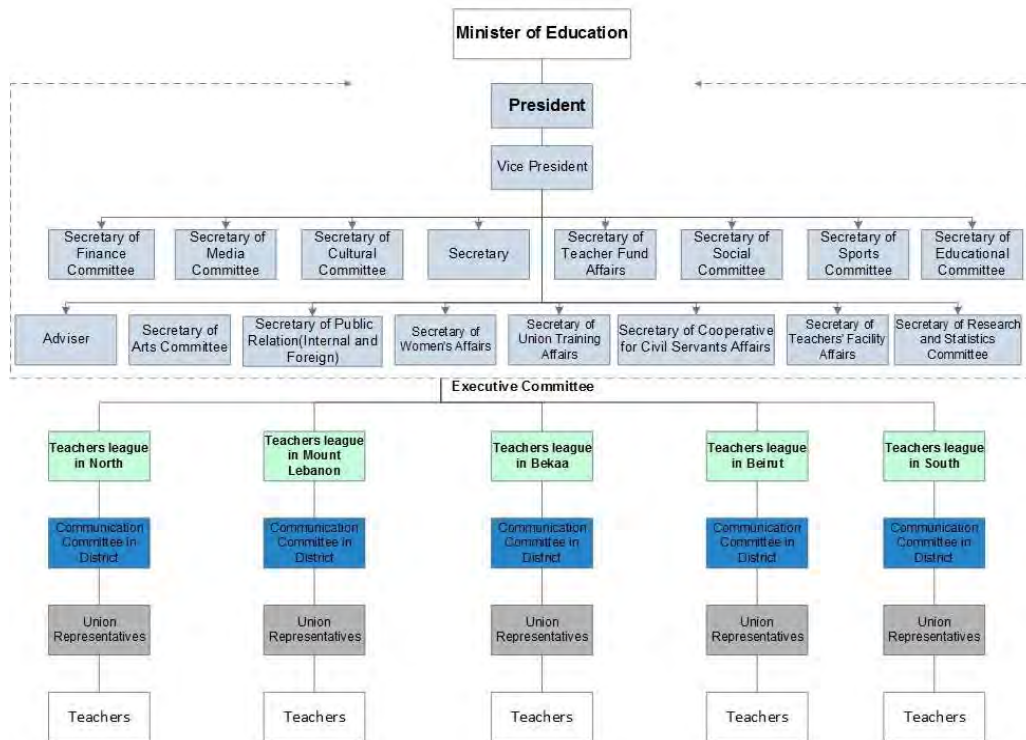


Figure 5.

Public Secondary School Teacher League's Organizational Chart



Lack of supportive conditions needed to facilitate union work

Union leaders and active members noted the absence of necessary conditions that facilitate union work. One of the primary union leaders (UP3) discussed the limited time that a teacher union leader has to work on the many union issues.

Union members, even the president of primary and secondary leagues, are committed to school hours. Subsequently, he or she would follow up on union



work after work. If there was a conflict in the work hours of the union and the school, then the priority is for the school.

The lack of training and absence of union facilities are also other challenges that hinder union work. Primary union leader (UP3) indicated that the experience of union leaders derives mostly from their political background rather than from union specific training. Although most union leaders are almost at the retirement age, they do not conduct training sessions to prepare new leaders to lead teacher unions in the future. He also stated that there is an absence of resources such as teacher union centre despite having a decree issued in 1982 for its establishment. Similarly, active members noted that both leaders and union members needed more training. A secondary active union member (AS3) stated: “there are a lot of union representatives who do not have union backgrounds. There are people who get elected, but they do not have previous union experiences.”

Excessive loyalty of union leaders and members to political parties

Union leaders and members agreed about excessive loyalty to political parties having a detrimental effect on unions in Lebanon. However, the results have shown a discrepancy between the perspective of union leaders and union members about this loyalty. Primary union leaders, who are partisan, asserted that they do not necessarily work based to their political parties’ agenda and have a union consciousness.

Contrarily, most active and inactive union members viewed their leaders as controlled by political sectarian leaders. Respondent AS1 conveyed this view stating:

In the leagues, they distanced independent union leaders and the former president because he is an important union leader. Unfortunately, the

executive committees in the leagues became representatives of political parties... We cannot do anything if our league's administration does not call on its members to take a stance. With respect to the current league, the decisions we take in general assemblies are not taken into consideration.

Similar to active members, inactive members believed that their union is currently submissive and pro-government, stating that the "the governing and political authority works to split the league and bring in a league that is loyal to it." A primary union leader (UP3) supported the union members' perspective when he discussed the flaw in the election process that allows incompetent union members to reach leadership positions.

The selection of trade union leaders has been based on political affiliations, especially when it is done on a broad level... It is not always the most competent teachers who end up in the highest union leadership positions.

Another union leader (UP6) recognized that their political affiliations negatively affected their performance when he said, "we are a political group. We represent politicians even if we are educators. If politicians get into a dispute, we also get into a dispute." Union leaders also believed that their members had more loyalty to political parties than they do to their union. Primary union leader (UP4) provided an example where a demonstration was expected to attract only around 300 members due to rainy weather. When union leaders invited a political sectarian leader to join the demonstration, member participation reached approximately 3000 to 4000.

Legal Barriers

The legal barrier was a major theme that emerged, and it included the lack of legal recognition of union and punitive decrees against unionizing in the public sector.



Lack of legal union recognition

Union leaders and active union members considered the lack of legal recognition as a union a major challenge. Secondary union leaders noted: “The first union challenge is that the league is not a union. We are a cultural league that was established under pressure, which resulted in the issuance of a decree.”

Also, one of the primary union leaders feared fragmentation of the league if it became a legal union:

Even though Lebanon has agreed on Convention 87 of International Labour Organization (ILO), union work is not allowed in public education... We are afraid to form a union and then have teachers in the north say they want their own union, the south wants a union, mathematics teachers want their own union, and Arabic teachers want a union.

Punitive decrees against unionizing

Union leaders and active members pointed to the punitive mandates that govern the union. As per Decree No. 112 issued in 1959, public school teacher unions are not allowed to organize and strike. Active union members expressed their fear of the use of these punitive decrees. A secondary active union member (AS2) stated that teachers are under continuous threat to get fired from their jobs.

Today, the Minister has threatened us. We conducted a strike, and he said that he would apply the Decree. If he applies the Decree, it means he can stop us from teaching and he can get us fired... On the other hand, if we have a union, the opposite happens. It would have statutory immunity.

Education-related Barriers

Participants in all three groups have raised the issue of the current status of the teaching profession, the existing acute

organizational functions that create challenges for union work, and the political interference in education.

Teaching as a low status profession

Union leaders and active members agreed that there is an absence of respect because of teaching being viewed as a blue-collar, feminized, and low salary profession. The politicized selection process of teachers is also compromising teacher quality and contributing to the low status of teaching. Union leader (UP5) pointed out that, similar to a notary public, teachers were previously considered to be a reference in the community and would be consulted on matters related to reading or writing. Today, according to union leaders, society views the teaching profession as a blue-collar profession. Union leader (UP3) explains:

Teaching and teachers are viewed as inferior, which is negative... This results in a person choosing teaching as a career only if compelled. If a person finds an alternative, he will forego teaching as a career. We live in a country where we will soon export teachers from outside like we do with housemaids.

Additionally, union leader UP8 discussed the problem of disrespect for teachers that led to physical abuse. This respondent criticized the methods that have been used by the Ministry to support students who have increased intimidation against teachers.

There is also another issue we have been talking about for two years now: violent acts that occur in schools. As a response, the Ministry of Education has created hotlines for parents. If teachers say anything to students, parents call. These days, teachers are getting mistreated as well. I saw a teacher who was physically abused by a student because he told the student to leave the classroom.



Moreover, a secondary active union member (AS4) described the dominance of female teachers in the school and attributed it to low salary.

Why is the percentage of female teachers reaching approximately 90% in public primary school, while the percentage for male teachers is only 10%? This is because a male considers that teaching does not allow him to form a family or secure the demands for his family.

Acute organizational dysfunctions

A union leader, active union members, and inactive members stressed the severity of the organizational problems that public schools face. Participants noted that the public no longer trusts the government or public schools due to its long history of neglect. Participants pointed out that the current curriculum is outdated, textbooks contain many errors, and the government does not secure teachers. There are many children who have social and psychological problems but do not have access to a professional staff of psychologists and counselors that can help them. This neglect has increased and reflected a negative school climate.

A primary union leader (UP3) described this school climate stating that these students with psychological problems have affected their fellow classmates and the learning environment.

Children from the lower impoverished classes go to public school. If you conduct a study in public schools, you will see a large percentage of students whose parents are divorced, whose dad is married to another woman, whose dad and mom are in dispute, whose [the parents] social condition is bad and who has placed the child in an orphanage since the parents have 10-12 children.

One of the inactive members (IP3) has mentioned the students' difficult social conditions and the rest agreed:

We, in public sector, are part of a social reality, which has many challenges because no one places their children in public schools. Public education is mostly for people who cannot afford private schooling... These students do not have enthusiasm to learn.

A primary active union member (AP5) pointed out the problems related to the quality of the curriculum.

The last curriculum that was implemented was supposed to be a five-year experiment. If there was an improvement, they will continue to use them and if not, they would remove them. It has been 18 years and they have not changed the curriculum. It has a lot of mistakes. We communicated this problem with them a hundred times. Every session we do on the refining of books, they end up leaving the same mistakes that we have previously highlighted.

Political Interferences in Education

In addition, participants from the three groups explicitly communicated how political sectarian leaders interfere in educational decisions to appoint their followers in public schools. These followers are, most of the time, incompetent, unprepared or have no desire to teach, but are only there to seek teaching as an employment opportunity.

A secondary school union leader (US8) communicated this problem when he highlighted appointment of contractual teachers and how sectarianism is engraved in society and in schools.

Contractual work is also a challenge because it transformed from an educational process to a political bazaar... Selection of members on committees is done based on political affiliations and sectarianism...sectarian quotas and clientelism have replaced competence.

Similarly, primary union leader (UP3) mentioned that the political leaders' interferences in hiring school principals have



resulted in having no criteria for appointment except for sectarian political affiliations.

Appointment of principals is not done based on experience or competence. First, if a person is going to be appointed in a Shiite area, he or she must be a Shiite. If he or she is going to be appointed in a Sunni area, then he or she has to be a Sunni. In Beirut, you cannot appoint a Shiite even if he has a doctorate and his opponent is a teacher who has only a brevet [brevet is a grade 9 certificate]. The priority is for the sect and the unification of the sect.

Moreover, active union members expressed concern over the corrupted politicization of educational inspection and professional development management. They noted, "Inspection is also politicized. Even professional development is politically assigned."

Inactive members focused on the school environment and tenure process stating that political leaders have created a tense sectarian environment in schools, where teachers feel injustice within the recruitment and promotions processes.

Political Barriers

Participants highlighted the political barriers in union work to be reflected in the manipulation of the public's perception about teacher unions, the lack of union participation in educational policies, and the influence of international development agencies on education policy. It is noteworthy that those who are actively involved in the union such as union leaders and active union members are the one that were able to highlight political barriers.

Lack of union participation in education policy

Most union leaders and few active union members discussed the absence of involvement of teacher unions in the Ministry's education reform initiatives. According to primary union leader

(UP3), one way the government marginalizes teacher leagues' role is through blocking unions from being part of educational planning.

The Ministry of Education is not engaging teacher unions in educational planning, in curriculum planning, or program planning. Teacher unions do not even have a true participative role in regular issues such as internal regulation in the schools.

Influence of international development agencies on education policy

Former president and few active union members attributed the negligence that occurs in public schools to neoliberal policies implemented by international development agencies to privatize the educational sector. As an example of neoliberalism, the former president discussed the Paris III conference. This conference set the conditions needed to promote economic reform through trade liberalization, privatization of the public sectors, and reduction in government expenditure. The former president explained:

We were fighting a project controlling the country. This project, which was part of Paris III and is related to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, is neoliberalism, the beast that has swept all third world countries. It struck the welfare state. Its aim is to privatize all the public services of the government.

Strategies Used by Public School Teacher Unions

Participants were asked about the strategies that teacher unions use to reach their goals. These methods include meet and confer, the use of pressure tactics, the formation of alliances with other labor unions, the use of modern communication tools, and the creation of networking opportunities. However, inactive members were only familiar with meet and confer and the use of pressure tactics as strategies. Here, we only present themes that were vital for the discussion section.



Table 5.

Strategies Used To Achieve Union Goals by Teacher Unions

Themes	Total Union Leaders (out of 17)	Total Active Union Members (out of 12)	Total Inactive union Members (out of 9)
Meet and Confer	15	4	9
Prepare Educational Conferences	16	9	0
Use Various Types of Pressure Tactics	17	11	9
Form Alliances with Other Labor Unions	2	4	0
Use Modern Communication tools	5	1	0
Create Networking Opportunity to Gain Support	1	0	0

Meet and Confer

Nearly all of the union leaders and inactive members and some active members indicated that teacher unions use meet and confer method as a union strategy. Secondary union leaders declared that they usually meet with politicians to follow up on union matters. Likewise, active union members described meet and confer method when the union negotiates demands with authority figures. Through meet and confer, teacher unions have also advocated for gender equity and attained benefits for married female teachers. Respondent AP5 stated: “we as female teachers now receive a family allowance. This was accomplished thanks to the league.”

Prepared Educational Conferences

Union leaders and active union members indicated that teacher unions prepared educational conferences to raise awareness of educational issues. However, active members disagreed on the extent to which public school teacher unions addressed educational concerns.

Public Secondary School Teachers League's union leaders communicated their attempts to have a role in improving education, but the current external constraints are impeding their work.

We have conducted many educational conferences. We have pointed out problems. However, the overall corruption that exists in the educational sector controlled the academic setting and secondary school teaching.

However, one active secondary school union member (AS3) specified that public school teacher unions focus mostly on increasing wages and have ignored their role in improving the educational sector.

From the practical side, the league is focused on increasing wages only. This is the reality... Leagues should also have a role in organizing programs and in following up on the advancement of education.

Use various types of pressure tactics

Nearly all participants recognized union pressure tactics. Inactive members are not quite aware of the procedure but know that teacher unions use strikes. Teacher unions have also used protests to raise awareness on the corruption in the country. A primary union leader (UP4) described how they used protests to criticize the corruption in the country and prove that the salary and scale increase can be financed.

Teacher unions acted as a civil movement through struggles, strikes, and protests... We saw the absence of accountability in real estate, harbors, and in marine properties, which in and of itself can finance the salary and scale increase if used properly. We formed a committee and started investigating all these issues.



Discussion

The results of this study reveal that public school teacher unions in Lebanon are facing many internal challenges that are caused by external factors. Also, the current legal and political constraints are impeding the public school leagues from achieving their goals. In the following section, we discuss these challenges and strategies used under three headings: absence of union presence and unity, disproportionate attention devoted to education-related demands, and external political pressure influencing union-government relationship.

Absence of Union Presence and Unity

The organizational and legal challenges have conveyed that a major problem facing public school teacher unions is the lack of legal recognition of the union. According to Decrees No. 871 and 1553, the purpose of public school teacher leagues is to focus “on social and cultural matters that concern teachers, organize their professional conditions, and improve their productivity” (p. 1). However, based on the results of this study, it is clear that this definition does not fully capture the objectives of public school teacher leagues. The actual function of public school teacher leagues differs from these decrees’ definition. Also, Article 15 of Law Decree No. 112 states that civil servants including teachers are prohibited from engaging in any political organizations, participating or inciting others to strike. This law would make the work of teacher unions extremely difficult, especially in representing their members. Moreover, the presence of such laws can discourage union members from participating in union activities, and hence, it is probably one of the causes for low union participation in strikes that is shown in Samaha (2006). The current

laws also impose the current organizational structures on public school teacher unions, making it more similar to a sports or cultural club. Roles such as secretary of arts committee, secretary of sports committee, and secretary of cultural committee are not similar to the structure of any labor union. In addition, some of the titles held by union leaders such as secretary of training affairs and secretary of teacher facility affairs are not functional, as the responses of union leaders and members showed that they do not have teacher union facilities or conduct training. This structure would undermine the function of the union and lead to a lack of transparency, blocking union members from monitoring what their leaders do. Furthermore, according to Bishara (2014), the absence of legal recognition of union creates a challenge for union leaders to collect membership fees and can weaken its power to support its activities. Similarly, Murillo et al. (2002), in examining teacher unions in Argentina and their impact, shows that there are unions referred to as *inscripta* in Argentina that are considered to be weak since they lack legal status but are still able to represent their members and call for strikes. Then, the authors state that monopolistic unions that have high density and legal recognition would be considered strong and able to attain “teachers’ tenure, budget allocation, employment, and even policy preferences” (Murillo et al., 2002, p. 24).

Most union leaders who have been supported by political parties and have assumed a leadership position are not qualified to lead. This problem exists because of the lack of criteria in the public teacher unions’ internal policies that does not require candidates running in elections to have militancy experience or union training to lead. Wolf and Lefèvre (2012) showed that union leaders of Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) that led the social movement during the Jasmine Revolution in 2011 were experienced since the UGTT’s



internal policies require union leaders to have at least nine years of militancy experience to run in the UGTT elections. In addition, there is currently no union training that would prepare newly elected public school union leaders and union representatives for their leadership roles.

More importantly, internal conflicts that have emerged from loyalty to political sectarian leaders and the superiority-inferiority dilemma between secondary and primary teachers have created disunity and contributed to ineffectiveness in the union. Union leaders being partisan raise serious concerns about the autonomy of unions, in terms of who makes the decisions and who do these decisions benefit. Union leaders in their response admitted that conflicts arising in political parties have reflected internally on them. Union members through their responses have also highlighted how union leaders' decisions were at times not aligned with their rank-and-file members. Daou (2017) agrees that union leaders have continuously hesitated to criticize political leaders and made pro-government decisions because of interferences from political leaders. Daou, however, did not differentiate between union decisions made by head of Independent Frontier Hanna Ghareeb or by pro-government leaders who came after 2015 elections. In fact, UCC under the leadership of Hanna Ghareeb, advocated for gender equity in benefits and raised awareness on corruption in society. Teacher unions in 2013 had protests and sit-ins in Zaitunay Bay and revealed statistics on public corruption made by political leaders with an aim to fund the salary scale increase (Lebanese Ministry of Information, 2013). Because the UCC's intention was mostly economic and no follow up was pursued, it did not win them the community support, but nevertheless they did seek a social justice approach and had full support of their members.

Disproportionate Attention Devoted Towards Education-related Demands

Lebanese teacher unions have played an awareness-raising role in education and prepared five educational conferences that addressed problems in public schools; however, they need to assume a more influential role in improving education. Union leaders have expressed that their role in education reforms with MEHE was marginalized and at other times limited to advisory, but union members believe that the unions have the capacity to be more proactive and involved in education reform. Public school teacher unions have worked with Educational International organization in 2016 and conducted surveys to examine the challenges facing Syrian refugees in accessing education. According to the results, they seek to plan a series of workshops to advocate and assist in addressing these challenges (Educational International, 2017). Despite the attempt of teacher unions to move beyond their traditional role and change their practices, research has shown that there is reluctance among different groups including teachers, school officials, and policymakers to view teacher unions as agents of change (Bascia, 2005; Simsek & Seashore, 2008).

External Political Pressure Influencing Union-Government Relationship

The government's intentional neglect of public schools, including an outdated curriculum, errors in textbooks, increase in precarious teachers, and lack of educational and teaching supplies are the consequences of neoliberal policies. Lebanon is a liberal state that was built on free-market ideology since the 1950s (Traboulsi, 2014). After Lebanese Civil War in 1989, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri introduced neoliberal reform policies to revive the Lebanese



economy. He managed to strengthen the financial and economic sectors but did not anticipate the increase in social inequality. Conferences such as Paris I, II, III and Cedre I were held to cover the Lebanese public debt that has currently reached \$80 billion due to political corruption (Azar, 2018). These conferences were supported by international organizations such as World Bank and IMF but their underlying motives and “hidden conditions” were feared by some of the political parties (Schenker, 2007). Moreover, in examining educational policies, one would note the neoliberal affect in the excessive autonomy granted to private schools, specifically in criteria for attaining a license, recruiting teachers, and choosing curriculum and assessment tools (El-Amine, 1994). This loose coupling system for private sector can also jeopardize education quality if there are no criteria set by MEHE or assessment for quality in place. Another neoliberal effect can be seen through appointments of incompetent teachers in public schools. In 2006, teacher unions held strikes against neoliberal policies where “200 thousand workers demonstrated against contractual appointments promoted by the Lebanese government following the Paris III conference” (Bou Khater, 2015). To understand the effect of precarious employment on education, Seifert et al. (2007) examines adult education contractual teachers’ behaviour and perceptions in Quebec, which reveal that precarious employment can negatively impact a person’s mental health, relationships with their fellow colleagues, and productivity. The job insecurity creates competition between teachers who are contractors and those who have permanent positions.

The relationship between Lebanese teacher unions and the government can mostly be described as moving from defiance before 2015 towards compliance and passivity after the political party affiliates won the teacher unions’ elections in public and private

schools. Murillo (2000) explains that unions that choose to cooperate with employer and restrain the union, or oppose the employer and use militancy, would usually lead to concessions if the restraint or militancy were successful. However, in Lebanon, boycotting official exams resulted in unsuccessful militancy and no concessions because the government refused to negotiate with the union. Also, with the election of partisan union leaders, it did not lead to full cooperation or concessions since many of union members were not in agreement with their leaders on their decisions. Although a law was passed to increase salary scale increase of teachers, it was never implemented and teachers currently face dire economic conditions. In addition, Murillo et al. (2002) explains that teacher unions that have high density but a conflicting relation with the government tend to result in an increase of strikes. Lebanese teacher unions can learn from the South African unions on how to develop positive government-union relationship. South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU) and National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA) have formed alliances with political parties in government and community to influence policy deliberations on South African Schools Act (Govender, 2015). SADTU improved its policy expertise and preserved its independence, while NAPTOSA, being autonomous and advocating for teacher professionalism, became a legal trade union, formed political alliances, and balanced between unionism and professionalism.

Limitations

The sample size of this study did not cover the private education sector. Consequently, expanding the sample size and reaching other sectors could have captured more challenges facing



teacher unions. Moreover, some of the union leaders who were contacted voiced their mistrust in the motive of the research and researcher. People in the Middle East perceive the researcher as a public investigator (El-Amine, 2009), which created a challenge for the researcher. Many of the primary and secondary union leaders refused to conduct interviews, preventing this study from capturing women's perspective as leaders and capturing all of the union leaders' views. Another limitation is that the questions and participants' responses were in the Arabic language; nonetheless, the researchers were cautious during translation.

Conclusion

This study contributes new insights into the challenges facing teacher unions in Lebanon and the strategies they currently use to achieve their objectives. This study uses the perspective of union leaders and members to identify public unions' challenges and strategies. The results of this study indicate that teacher unions in Lebanon have attempted to take a social justice role, but this role was limited to raising awareness. Also, they have not adopted any new creative strategies, resulting in failed militancy and ineffective unions. In addition, they are facing many internal and external barriers, including legal barrier that restricts the definition of unionism under the label of "leagues" and places decision-making power in the hands of the Minister of Education and organizational barriers that include union structure, submissiveness of union leaders and union members to political sectarian leaders, lack of training, incompetence in leadership positions, and disunity among public school unions due to superior-inferior dilemma between secondary and primary teachers. This study also contributes to the literature on

teacher unions in suggesting ways to strengthen the internal structure of the organization and maintain unity in times of hardship and continuous attacks on unions. Despite the fact that some teacher unions have collective bargaining rights, it does not create unity within the union. Establishing good communication with union members is among the steps to ensure union representation and resolve conflicts. Moreover, having a union with a social justice orientation changes the perceptions about a self-serving association and strengthens the connection with the community. Also, it is essential for the union to attempt and create a partnership with the government and work towards effective education reforms.

We recommend that public school teacher unions in Lebanon gain legal status as a labor union. This step could prevent government interferences and allow public schools teacher unions to better represent their members. Second, union leaders must set criteria for the elections that ensure competent teachers reach leadership positions. Third, when teachers are elected in a union representative positions or executive committees, they should be informed about their roles and expectations. Training is also essential for union leaders to improve their union's effectiveness and ensure its sustainability. Fourth, union leaders must use new strategies such as creating alliances with the community to be able to combat sectarianism, racism, violence, and corruption in the schools and in society. Finally, the Ministry of Education needs to establish a partnership with teacher unions to improve education.



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