



Women Empowerment through Cultural Festival Project

Gender-Responsive Strategic Framework for Culture Management

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I. Introduction & Rationale

Context

The Baalbeck Festival, one of the most emblematic cultural events in Lebanon and the Middle East, plays a central role in promoting local heritage, arts, and creativity. Since its inception, the festival has established itself as a place for encounter and dialogue, bringing together artists, cultural professionals, and the public in a unique setting that combines history, heritage, and modernity. In a context where the Lebanese cultural sector is facing multiple crises, economic, social, and political, the Baalbeck Festival serves as a key vector for resilience and cultural revitalization.

In Lebanon, women's participation in the cultural sector remains limited, despite their significant presence as creators, artists, and professionals. Patriarchal structures, conservative social norms, and the lack of inclusive public policies continue to hinder their full participation. According to the 2020 UN Women report, Lebanon is among the countries with the largest gender gaps in the world, ranking 145th out of 153 countries. This inequality is particularly visible in the cultural field, where women are often confined to peripheral or informal roles, with restricted access to decision-making and leadership positions, thus limiting their influence on cultural policies and institutional practices.

Furthermore, the imbalance is even more pronounced in cultural production, particularly in the areas of set design, technical management, event production, and sound, than in the performing arts. Yet, this sector is of major importance, as it offers a wide range of employment opportunities and constitutes a key lever for women's economic empowerment, provided that inclusive and gender-responsive approaches are fully integrated.

In this context, the Baalbeck Festival collaborated with UNESCO on a pioneering project aimed at promoting gender equality and strengthening women's participation in the cultural sector, particularly in artistic production and cultural project management. This initiative created training, mentoring, and visibility opportunities for women, while raising awareness among the public and professionals about gender equality issues. The project also actively involved students, helping to raise awareness among young people and strengthen the intergenerational dimension of cultural inclusivity.

Thus, this initiative represents a vital first step towards transforming the Lebanese cultural landscape by integrating gender perspectives into cultural management practices and promoting the equitable representation of women in all aspects of cultural production and dissemination.

Link to the Global Framework

The project “Women Empowerment through Cultural Festival Project”, led by the Baalbeck Festival in collaboration with UNESCO had the primary objective of promoting gender equality and strengthening women's participation in the Lebanese cultural sector. Specifically, the project included professional training for women in artistic production and cultural project management, mentoring sessions with sector experts, and awareness-raising activities aimed at the general public and students.

A particularly innovative and rewarding aspect of the project was the design and production of costumes used during festivals, allowing women to practice their skills, participate directly in artistic production, and have their work exhibited to a wide audience. This initiative helped strengthen their visibility, leadership, and confidence, while concretely demonstrating the impact of their contribution to the cultural sector.

The project is also aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which UNESCO actively contributes. More specifically, it addresses Goals 5, 8 and 11:

Goal 5: *Gender Equality. The project aims to promote the empowerment of women in the cultural sector, increase their participation in the production and management of cultural events, and create an inclusive environment where women can fully develop their skills and potential.*

Goal 8: *Decent work and economic growth. By equipping women with professional skills, practical experience, and access to networks within an internationally renowned festival, the project helps improve their employability and access to decent work opportunities in the cultural and creative industries. It thus supports sustainable livelihoods and strengthens the role of culture as a driver of inclusive economic growth.*

Goal 11: *Sustainable Cities and Communities. By strengthening women's participation and promoting cultural diversity, the festival contributes to building inclusive and sustainable urban and community spaces, where culture becomes a driver of social cohesion and local development.*

This approach illustrates how local cultural initiatives can align with global sustainable development strategies, translating the UN's universal ambitions into concrete actions on the ground, particularly in support of women and youth.

Statement of commitment

The Baalbeck Festival reaffirms its commitment to promoting inclusivity, equality, and cultural diversity in all its future activities. Aware of the central role of women and youth in the vitality of the cultural sector, the festival is committed to continuing to develop initiatives that promote their participation and leadership. The project conducted with UNESCO, as well as the active involvement of students, is a concrete example of this approach, creating opportunities for training, awareness-raising, and visibility for women in the cultural field.

Through this commitment, the Baalbeck Festival aims not only to strengthen social cohesion and cultural diversity at the local level, but also to contribute to the advancement of global sustainable development goals, particularly gender equality and the development of sustainable and inclusive communities.

II. Vision and Guiding Principles

Vision

The Baalbeck Festival aspires to become a catalyst for festivals and cultural events that celebrate diversity and promote gender equality in cultural expression and participation.

This vision is based on the idea that culture is a fundamental lever for social cohesion, resilience, and sustainable development. By integrating a gender-sensitive approach, the Baalbeck Festival aims to ensure that everyone, especially women and youth, has equal access to opportunities for artistic creation, cultural production, and leadership within the cultural sector.

The project focused on several complementary areas of cultural production, including artistic workshops, design and costume creation for performances, and activities related to production and stage coordination. These different components were reinforced by professional mentoring sessions and the active involvement of students, combining practical training, visibility, and empowerment.

The initiative highlighted the importance of active and sustainable engagement of women in the cultural sector through workshops, mentoring, and concrete artistic collaborations. By encouraging their participation in all stages of cultural creation and production, while taking into account social barriers and family constraints, the project aims to promote the lasting inclusion of women and gradually contribute to the transformation of patriarchal dynamics within the Lebanese cultural landscape.

Guiding Principles

Equality and Inclusivity

Ensure that all stakeholders, regardless of their gender, age, origin, or social status, have access to the same opportunities and resources, particularly in artistic production and the management of cultural projects.

Respect for Cultural Rights and Diversity

Valorize the plurality of cultural expressions, protect local heritage, and promote the acceptance of all artistic identities and traditions.

Participation and Representation

Encourage the active participation and equitable representation of all segments of society, particularly women and youth, in the design, production, and dissemination of cultural events.

Accountability and Transparency

Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of actions, the proper use of resources, and transparency towards partners, participants, and the public.

Intersectionality

Recognize and address multiple forms of discrimination or marginalization in order to develop inclusive actions that are responsive to the various barriers encountered by participants.

Innovation and Creativity

Encourage innovative approaches in artistic creation and cultural project management, enabling women and young people to propose new ideas and actively contribute to the development of the sector.

Sustainable Development

Align cultural practices with the Sustainable Development Goals, integrating environmental and social dimensions, and promoting projects that strengthen the resilience of local communities.

Mentoring and Skills Development

Provide training, mentoring, and support opportunities to strengthen women's leadership and youth engagement in the cultural sector.

Social cohesion and dialogue

Promoting culture as a vehicle for dialogue, mutual understanding, and rapprochement between different communities and generations.

III. Objectives

The project aimed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the cultural and creative sector, while highlighting the importance of Lebanon's cultural heritage, particularly the historic and iconic site of Baalbeck. The goal is to integrate inclusive practices into all stages of the organization and implementation of the Baalbeck Festival, in order to strengthen cultural participation while protecting and promoting national heritage. More specifically, the project's objectives were:

- 1. Integrate gender equality** into all aspects of the festival's planning, programming, production, and communication, ensuring that women's voices and perspectives are represented and valued at all levels.
Develop guidelines and practical tools to ensure that every stage of the festival respects the principles of gender parity and inclusion.
- 2. Ensure inclusive representation of women in all dimensions of the festival:**
 - Among artists and performers: promote the equitable participation of women on stage, highlighting their creative contributions and cultural expression, while promoting local artistic heritage.
 - In technical and production teams: encourage the recruitment of women in traditionally male-dominated roles, such as sound, lighting, set design, and costume design.
 - In management and decision-making: strengthen the presence of women in leadership, coordination, and programming positions to promote balanced governance structures.
- 3. Empower women through practical engagement, training, and mentoring:**
 - Offer skills-building programs to develop expertise in cultural production, event management, and artistic creation, in line with promoting Baalbeck's cultural heritage.
 - Establish mentoring opportunities to support women in developing their professional expertise, leadership, and self-confidence.
 - Directly involve women in festival activities, including costume design, stage coordination, and artistic production, to provide them with practical experience in an internationally renowned cultural event.
 - Improve employability and career prospects by exposing them to an international festival and highlighting their contribution to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, enabling them to develop transferable skills and access other professional opportunities in the cultural sector.

- 4. Promote safe, inclusive, and collaborative cultural spaces** that encourage creativity, collaboration, and mutual respect, among all participants by ensuring an environment where women can fully express themselves and contribute to cultural life.
Implement concrete practices to ensure that production and creative spaces are accessible and welcoming to everyone.
- 5. Integrate sustainable and inclusive practices within cultural institutions,** within cultural institutions and festivals to ensure the long-term integration of gender equality principles into cultural programs in Lebanon, while strengthening the protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

IV. Strategic Pillars & Key Actions

In order to consolidate its commitment to gender equality, inclusivity, and the promotion of cultural heritage, the Baalbeck Festival has defined several strategic priorities that guide its short- and long-term actions. These pillars reflect a comprehensive vision of a more equitable, participatory, and sustainable festival that serves Lebanon's cultural and social development.

Pillar 1: Inclusive programming

- Integrate a gender approach into the selection of artists, themes, and performances presented at the festival.
- Promote cultural diversity by highlighting women artists, young artists, and artists from diverse backgrounds.
- Create spaces for co-creation that foster dialogue between local and international artists, contributing to the transmission of knowledge and the promotion of Lebanon's intangible heritage.
- Develop satellite cultural activities (exhibitions, workshops, conferences) around the themes of equality, diversity, and heritage.

Pillar 2: Institutional strengthening and capacity building

- Set up regular training sessions for festival teams on gender-responsive management, inclusive communication, and participatory governance.
- Strengthen the capacities of women and young people through workshops, mentoring programs, and technical training in cultural production.
- Establish partnerships with Lebanese universities to create a pool of young talent, enabling students to undertake internships, assignments, or practical projects during the festival's preparation and implementation period.
- Support the upskilling of local staff to ensure the sustainability of inclusive practices within the festival.

Pillar 3: Participation and leadership

- Encourage the active participation of women in management committees, decision-making bodies, and festival coordination teams.
- Highlight inspiring women role models from the cultural sector to increase the visibility of women leadership.
- Promote gender balance at all levels of festival governance.

- Encourage intergenerational collaboration and knowledge transfer between experienced professionals and young talent.

Pillar 4: Equitable access and cultural production

- Create equitable opportunities for women and young people in cultural production, particularly in costume design, set design, logistics, and artistic coordination.
- Implement measures to promote access to the festival's cultural activities for marginalized audiences (rural women, young people in remote areas, people with disabilities).
- Collaborate with local NGOs to ensure a better understanding of the social and cultural context and to facilitate the acceptance of international initiatives by local communities.
- Use these partnerships to identify and support emerging talent from disadvantaged backgrounds, while creating bridges between culture, education, and employment.

Pillar 5: Gender-responsive advocacy and communication

- Adopt inclusive and diversity-friendly communication in all festival campaigns.
- Implement awareness-raising actions on gender equality and cultural diversity through the media, social networks, and public activities.
- Promote the Baalbeck Festival as a model of a fair and sustainable cultural event, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 5 and 11.
- Collaborate with UNESCO, local NGOs, and national cultural actors to convey a collective message of respect, equality, and cultural resilience.

V. Implementation Framework

The success of the project relies on structured, collaborative, and inclusive implementation, mobilizing various stakeholders and resources to achieve the strategic objectives of the Baalbeck Festival. Analysis of the project reveals important lessons for strengthening the planning and management of future initiatives. The implementation framework can be structured around the following four main areas:

Stakeholders

The project involves a wide range of actors, ensuring a participatory and multisectoral approach:

Public institutions: Ministries of Culture and Tourism .

Since its creation, the Baalbeck Festival has collaborated with the Ministries of Culture and Tourism. From the 1950s onward, the objective was to attract European visitors and promote the Roman heritage by bringing the temples to life and developing cultural tourism. This collaboration has always existed but remained limited, often symbolic or consultative, particularly due to budgetary constraints. It is important to emphasize the potential of strengthened cooperation to further support cultural initiatives and gender equality.

Funders and Sponsors: firstly, donors and philanthropists from the Lebanese diaspora or private individuals, who financially support the cultural initiatives, and secondly, local sponsors and Lebanese companies, who contribute to the funding of the activities and benefit from visibility through the festival. Both play a key role as stakeholders, enabling the realization and sustainability of the projects.

Cultural Partners - Artists and Individuals: Local artists and individuals were involved in co-leading the workshops, engaging participants, and promoting cultural heritage. Their direct involvement helped create practical learning spaces and highlight local skills in artistic and cultural production.

Universities and academic institutions: collaboration to involve students in internships, practical projects, or missions during the festival, thus creating a pool of talent for cultural production.

Local communities: active participation in the co-creation and promotion of cultural initiatives, particularly those related to the visibility and empowerment of women.

Partnerships

International organizations: such as UNESCO, providing expertise, training, and technical support for the implementation of gender-responsive initiatives.

Local NGOs: collaboration to identify beneficiaries, facilitate community acceptance of international activities, and provide logistical and cultural support.

Universities: creating a pool of students and young professionals, enabling them to be involved in practical missions, internships, or production activities during the festival.

These partnerships make it possible to pool skills and resources, ensure the quality of training, and maximize the long-term impact of the project.

Resources

To ensure the success of the initiatives, the project mobilizes a range of human, financial, and technical resources:

Human resources: trainers and experts in production, styling, artistic coordination, cultural project management, and gender awareness.

Financial resources: funding for the implementation of workshops, costume production, mentoring activities, and event logistics.

Technical and material resources: training and production venues, equipment for shows and workshops, teaching materials, and digital tools.

Expertise: individuals who have already conducted training and pilot activities as part of the Baalbeck-UNESCO project, ensuring the transfer of skills and the continuity of best practices.

Capacity Development

Skills development is a central pillar for the sustainability of actions and the empowerment of women:

Continuing education in cultural production, set design, styling, stage coordination, and arts project management.

Hands-on workshops directly involving women and young people in costume design, staging, and show organization.

Mentoring and coaching programs to develop participants' professional skills, leadership, and autonomy.

Sharing of best practices and know-how through collaborations with UNESCO, local NGOs, and universities, ensuring the dissemination of methods and their long-term adoption in the Lebanese cultural sector.

VI. Monitoring, Evaluation & Accountability

Monitoring and evaluation are essential elements in ensuring the transparency, effectiveness, and sustainability of the project. The Baalbeck Festival, in collaboration with UNESCO and its partners, is committed to implementing a rigorous system for measuring progress in gender equality, inclusivity, and cultural participation, while ensuring accountability to beneficiary communities and institutional partners.

Gender-Responsive Indicators and Benchmarks

Develop a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess the integration of gender into all festival activities (planning, programming, training, production).

Measure the participation and representation of women in different areas: management, production, artistic performance, training, and decision-making.

Assess the project's impact on strengthening the professional skills and employability of the women trained.

Monitor changes in social perceptions of the presence and role of women in the cultural sector through surveys, focus groups, and interviews with local communities.

Define annual benchmarks to measure progress toward the objectives set, particularly in terms of diversity, inclusion, and capacity building.

Annual Reporting on Progress and Challenges

Produce an annual evaluation report documenting activities carried out, results achieved, and key challenges encountered.

Reports will include comparative analyses between festival editions to assess ongoing progress and identify areas for improvement.

Include testimonials and case studies from participants (women, young people, students) to highlight the human and social impacts of the project.

Share results with partners (UNESCO, NGOs, universities, ministries, donors) to ensure transparency, coordination, and alignment of efforts at the national and international levels.

Community Feedback and Participatory Evaluation Mechanisms

Establish community consultation mechanisms to gather feedback and recommendations from participants, beneficiaries, and festival audiences.

Organize participatory evaluation workshops bringing together key stakeholders, women beneficiaries, young people, trainers, local NGOs, and authorities, to jointly analyze results and adjust actions accordingly.

Create accessible communication channels (forms, digital platforms, local meetings) enabling communities to express themselves freely on activities, challenges, and future needs.

Ensure a framework of mutual accountability, in which results are shared publicly, commitments are reaffirmed, and strategies are adapted based on collective learning.

VII. Risk management and sustainability

The success and sustainability of a gender-responsive approach in cultural projects and festivals requires rigorous risk anticipation and the implementation of appropriate strategies to tackle them.

Obstacles

The main risks can arise at several levels. At the social level, cultural or community resistance to gender equality principles can hinder the implementation of activities. At the institutional level, a lack of understanding or skills in gender mainstreaming, as well as limited human and financial resources, can compromise the effectiveness of the project. Finally, external factors such as political instability, economic crises, or logistical constraints can have a direct impact on the continuity of actions.

One of the main obstacles identified is the lack of self-confidence among some of the participating women, which can lead them to withdraw from the project. To address this, it is essential to implement strategies aimed at strengthening their mental and emotional engagement by fostering their passion for cultural work. This can be achieved through mentoring, coaching, and personalized support workshops, activities that highlight their achievements, and hands-on experiences in artistic production that allow them to see the impact of their contributions. The goal is to transform their self-perception, reinforce their motivation, and encourage their perseverance in the cultural sector.

Mitigation strategies

To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a proactive and collaborative approach.

Strengthen community acceptance: organize awareness campaigns and dialogue sessions with local communities to promote understanding and adherence to the principles of equality and inclusion.

Collaborate with local actors: Establish strong partnerships with local NGOs that are familiar with the field and enjoy the trust of the population. This cooperation will facilitate the implementation of activities and promote their acceptance, particularly when international institutions or festivals are involved.

Institutional strengthening: provide regular training for work teams on gender mainstreaming, create practical tools (guides, checklists, procedures), and establish internal monitoring mechanisms to ensure consistent and sustainable implementation.

Flexibility and adaptation: develop alternative plans in case of unforeseen events and ensure flexible resource allocation to maintain activities even in crisis situations.

VIII. Recommendations for Future Projects

Sustainability

Sustainability depends on integrating principles of equality and gender sensitivity into institutional standards and the organizational culture of partners.

Institutionalizing gender-responsive practices: integrating equality criteria into recruitment, funding, and partnership policies.

Promoting women leadership: encouraging women's participation in decision-making bodies and offering them opportunities for professional development.

Building bridges with academia: Collaborate with universities and cultural institutes to create “recruitment pools” that allow students to actively participate in festivals through internships, fieldwork, or applied research projects. This promotes skills transfer, professional succession, and local anchoring of the project.

Long-term vision: consolidate partnerships and incorporate gender considerations into cultural development strategies to ensure that inclusion and equality remain structural priorities even after the project has ended.

Strengthening Gender Mainstreaming and Protective Frameworks in Future Projects

The Women Empowerment through Cultural Festival Project has highlighted several key lessons that can guide the development of future gender-focused cultural initiatives.

First, conducting an in-depth gender analysis prior to launching projects appears to be an essential lever for better identifying the specific needs, structural barriers, and social dynamics affecting women's participation in the cultural sector. Such an analysis would make it possible to more effectively guide the design of activities and strengthen their transformative impact.

In addition, the more systematic integration of gender experts and actors specializing in women's rights, in collaboration with professionals in the cultural sector, would contribute to a better understanding of the realities on the ground and a sustainable appropriation of the principles of equality.

Finally, experience highlights the need for future projects to address more explicitly issues related to safety, well-being, and the prevention of violence and harassment in cultural spaces, through clear frameworks, zero-tolerance policies, and appropriate protection mechanisms.

These areas for reflection provide a framework for consolidating, in the long term, an inclusive, equitable, and respectful culture within festivals and cultural institutions in Lebanon.

Feedback Mechanisms and Evaluation by Participants

It is essential to gather feedback from participants to better understand their needs, perceptions, and expectations for the future. Implementing satisfaction surveys or reflection questionnaires would allow participants to express their point of view and share their ideas, some of which may be innovative, about the project. This feedback not only helps improve the quality of the workshops and programs but also encourages participants to become actively involved and reflect on their own journey in the cultural sector.

Creation of communities of practice for beneficiaries

To ensure the sustainability of actions and strengthen the long-term impact of the project, it would be valuable to create communities of practice bringing together women beneficiaries. These communities could serve as platforms for networking and skills exchange, promoting the professional integration of women in the cultural sector, sharing experiences, and strengthening collaboration among peers.

Raising Young People's Awareness of Cultural History and the Role of Women

It is essential to inform and educate the younger generation about Lebanon's cultural history, as many have limited knowledge of its heritage and past initiatives. To ensure the continuity and development of the cultural sector, young people need to understand not only the major historical figures but also the role of women in projects such as festivals. It is recommended to develop educational and interactive tools, such as introductory materials, workshops, or multimedia resources, to allow young people to discover how women have contributed to culture and artistic production, thereby strengthening their engagement with and appreciation of the national cultural heritage.

Inclusion of Older People in Cultural and Gender Equality Initiatives

In local communities, it is essential not to marginalize older people in initiatives related to culture and gender equality. While many cultural projects focus primarily on younger generations, older people represent an essential reservoir of memory, experience, and knowledge related to cultural heritage and historical narratives.

In future cultural projects, older people could be considered both as beneficiaries and as active stakeholders. Their involvement could take the form of intergenerational meetings, workshops on knowledge transfer, testimonials, or contributions to cultural activities, particularly those related to the cultural history, the heritage of a city, and the role of women in culture.

This forward-looking approach would aim to encourage intergenerational dynamics, promoting collaboration between young people, women, and older people in order to preserve, transmit, and renew cultural heritage. It would also help to strengthen the acceptance of gender equality

initiatives within local communities and to firmly anchor the values of inclusivity, diversity, and participation in the festival's future cultural activities.

Raising Awareness and Engaging Sponsors

It is essential to actively involve local sponsors and businesses by raising their awareness of the importance of culture and supporting women's activities in the cultural sector. Beyond their financial contributions, their involvement can enhance the visibility and impact of initiatives, encourage inclusive practices, and promote positive social responsibility. By integrating businesses as strategic partners, the festival can create a sustainable ecosystem where support for culture and gender equality becomes a shared value and is integrated into corporate social responsibility policies.

Strengthening Collaboration Between NGOs and Universities

It is recommended to strengthen collaboration between local and national NGOs working for gender equality and cultural development, particularly by forging links between those based in Beirut and those active in regions such as Baalbek. These partnerships would allow for better mobilization of local communities, facilitate the implementation of training sessions and workshops, and ensure greater acceptance of the festival's initiatives. Such coordination would also foster the creation of bridges with universities, offering young people opportunities for internships and active participation, while consolidating a sustainable network of stakeholders committed to an inclusive and equitable culture.