

Misogynistic Discourse and Other Types of VAWP as Forms of Backlash on Feminism in Lebanon

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Abstract

This paper examines anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon, focusing on misogynistic discourse and violence against women in politics (VAWP). It places the Lebanese situation within the global body of research on patriarchal backlash and contends that political familism, sectarian division, and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms all contribute to systemic discrimination. Drawing on incidents from April to June 2023, the analysis shows how misogynistic rhetoric, religiously inflected narratives, and cyber harassment function as mechanisms of delegitimization against female political candidates, activists, and journalists. Strategies like “purple washing,” in which elites coopt feminist ideology to uphold preexisting power structures, exacerbate these practices. Backlash thus operates not only through overt violence but also through discursive and symbolic practices that constrain women’s political participation and reinforce hierarchical systems. By framing VAWP as both a structural and discursive phenomenon, this paper contributes to feminist scholarship on backlash and underscores its implications for women’s political agency in sectarian contexts. It further shows that anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon exemplifies wider authoritarian and patriarchal retrenchments that erode prospects for inclusive governance and cement the status quo.

Keywords: backlash, violence against women in politics (VAWP), Lebanon, feminism, political familism, political participation

Introduction

Western literature defines backlash as a strong adverse reaction to actions disturbing the existing power dynamics. In the Lebanese context anti-feminist backlash is understood as systemic discrimination that women face in economic, social, legal, and political fields obstructing their access to decision-making positions and increasing their vulnerability to violence, increasingly dissuading their involvement in political activity (El Rahi, 2023). Backlash is frequently manifested through attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, ris-

ing sexism, and homophobia. This global phenomenon expresses itself via contemporary forms of patriarchal politics linked to racialized agendas, traditionalism, authoritarianism, and restrictions to civic space (Edstrom et al., 2023). Political factions have often utilized misogynistic discourse and Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) as tools for backlash on feminism (Barker & Jurasz, 2019).

In Lebanon, the backlash is pronounced due to the intersection of political instability and sectarian divisions. Female political candidates, activists and journalists have faced threats, harassment, and even violent attacks, especially during electoral periods and political upheavals (Chebaro et al., 2022). Concerning political activists and journalists, the October 2019 uprising, in which many women and youth demanded systemic change, has been greeted with increased patriarchal pushback. As for women political candidates, traditional political elites frequently use misogynistic rhetoric to discredit female candidates, attempting to maintain the status quo and stifle progressive voices (Chebaro, 2023). Although the list of backlash incidents is exponentially growing, this paper aims to explore cases from April to June 2023 in which backlash against feminism in Lebanon is often deployed through misogynistic discourse and other types of violence. By investigating these cases, this paper intends to shed light on the ongoing struggle for gender equality in a country characterized by political familism and dominated by political instability and ingrained patriarchal norms.

Misogynistic Discourse and VAWP in a System of Political Familism

Lebanese women's participation in politics has been hindered by structural multi-dimensional discrimination encompassing social, cultural, economic, legal and political barriers. Historically, political familism, along with patriarchal power dynamics and structures, have held the reins of politics (Geha, 2020). Political familism refers to the "deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms (idiomatic kinship), practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their needs and demands in relation to the state or polity and by the state or state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship and a public discourse that privileges family" (Joseph, 2011, p.150). In this system women's family members are promoted to leadership positions under the guise of feminism. This practice reinforces patriarchal standards and preserves the family's political power by co-opting feminist rhetoric and symbolism, presenting a façade of empowerment while maintaining the status quo.

Women from traditional parties and political families are often used to oppose and silence progressive women leaders, seen as threats to the establishment. This manipulation hinders genuine reforms, ensuring the old patriarchal framework remains unchallenged. Consequently, this approach impedes the advancement of women's rights and empowerment in Lebanon, preventing significant changes that would challenge entrenched power structures and promote true gender equality (Geha, 2020). The very few women who participate in politics are usually members of traditional political families or are supported by them. When other women "dare" to participate in politics, they are frequently subjected to harassment and violence to silence their voices.

Misogyny serves as a form of backlash against feminism, often manifesting through violent discourse and practices directed against women. This includes the use of sexist insults, derogatory terminology, stereotyping, and disinformation to undermine the credibility and authority of female politicians and activists, consequently, delegitimizing them (Sessa, 2020). VAWP, considered yet a hidden type of violence by many, uses different strategies and tactics to undermine women in decision-making (UN Women, 2021). The national context plays a role in defining the forms, intensity, and impact of violence against

women activists (Chebaro, 2021). In Lebanon, according to a research study ahead of the parliamentary elections of 2022, VAWP was a factor contributing to the self-censorship of female politicians (Chebaro & Mikhael, 2022).

The right to free speech is often invoked to justify violence against women in politics (VAWP), but this violence infringes upon the free speech of targeted women (UN Women et al., 2018). The International Center for Journalists (ICJ) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report that 73% of female journalists experience online violence, including physical threats (25%) and sexual violence (18%) (Posetti et al., 2020). The same study identified political actors as the second most frequent source of attacks and abuse (37%) after anonymous or unknown attackers (57%) (Posetti et al., 2020). This significantly impacts their careers and civic engagement. Despite reporting incidents, social media platforms rarely act due to inadequate gender and context sensitivity (Park et al., 2023; Chebaro & Mikhael, 2022). Addressing this requires more robust, gender-sensitive responses from social media and communities. Moreover, misinterpreted derivative religious texts are repeatedly used to sideline women (UN Women, 2016), effectively clustering them and making their leadership unidimensional related to their role as housewives and caregivers.

Lately, while several women have announced their candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic, politicians and the highest religious authorities from diverse sects insisted on having a male president and respecting customary law (Al Joumhouria, 2022). The Council of Muftis in Lebanon supported the sexist discourse by issuing a statement pointing out that “Lebanon does not lack competent men who believe in its message of coexistence, but it lacks the mechanism to achieve national consensus around such men” (Lebanon Debate, 2023). According to a study by UN Women (2021), sexism and misogyny in politics have detrimental short- and long-term repercussions on women’s political participation, such as discouraging many young women from pursuing politics as a career and therefore structurally disempowering them.

Many religious men, politicians, and traditional political families in Lebanon often claim to support women’s political empowerment, but this frequently masks an ulterior motive. This tactic, known as “purple washing,” involves using superficial support for women’s rights to enhance traditionalists’ image while preserving the status quo (Martinez-Fierro & Garza-Veloz, 2022). They support women who align with their objectives while marginalizing and silencing those who oppose their power. Such selective autocratic liberalism creates a backlash against genuine progress that threatens patriarchal rule, effectively obstructing true advancements in gender equality and women’s political empowerment.

Violence Against Politically Active Women

Violence against politically active women, whether they are voters, candidates, councilors, mukhtar, mayoral and municipal councilors, parliamentarians, trade unionists, students, community activists, bloggers, or journalists, escalates as their activism increases. This violence is particularly intense against female opponents, who oppose the established status quo (Chebaro et al., 2022).

Female political candidates and activists have faced threats, harassment, and even violent attacks, both online and offline, because of their advocacy for women’s rights especially during and after the uprising of October 2019. In some cases, women have been physically assaulted by their opponents or by the supporters of the status quo. In others, they have been subject to online abuse and harassment to force them to quit using these

spaces to express their opinions, to raise awareness, to request equal rights, to highlight infringements and to lobby. Those attacks targeted mainly prominent female journalists who were creating alternative spaces for more freedom of expression, particularly for women. The attacks were often motivated by misogyny and a desire to silence the voices of women who were speaking out against gender-based violence and discrimination.

In a new attempt to suppress journalists and activists and silence them, the Cybercrime and Intellectual Property Protection Bureau summoned the Editor in Chief of “Sharika wa Laken,” a feminist platform, and the Executive Director of FEMALE Organization, journalist and feminist activist, Hayat Mirshad, to appear before the Bureau in 2023. She was sued for defamation after she and her platform campaigned against a play by Joe Kodeih, an actor and director, due to allegations of sexual harassment made against him by several women and young girls in 2020. Consequently, he brought a lawsuit against her. In response, dozens of activists and journalists rallied outside the Justice Palace. The Feminist Platform in Lebanon, a network of over 50 NGOs, issued a statement to support Mirshad; the head of the Press Editors Syndicate denounced in a statement the restrictions on freedom of expression.

The situation for feminist activists and journalists in Lebanon is very concerning. The backlash and threats that they face are a serious impediment to their work. The Cybercrime Bureau must not be used to silence the voices of those who are working to expose violence against women. Instead of attacking the journalists who expose the truth, judges should prosecute perpetrators of violence and take the testimonies of harassed women seriously. After 2019, the feminist movement in Lebanon continues to face exponential backlash, threats, and attempts to silence those who speak up for democracy and human rights. In addition, the Lebanese judiciary is not doing enough to protect the freedom of expression of feminist activists and journalists. In many cases, when feminist activists and journalists are attacked, the judiciary does not take action to investigate or prosecute the perpetrators. This sends a message that the judiciary is not committed to protecting the right to free speech, especially for women.

It is even worrisome that some positioned people in the judicial system have publications and public platforms to attack and demonize feminism and gender equality concepts and to reaffirm stereotypical beliefs that imprison women in caregiving roles, describing it as divinely dictated. This leads to questioning their impartiality when investigating cases related to feminist activists or to examine cases related to violence committed against women. The different forms of VAWP have an important impact on young women and girls who aspire to political leadership but would refrain from any political activity when they witness criticism, attack, mockery, slamming, and indecent jokes targeting women politicians and role models. These young women would not be motivated to lead when women in decision-making positions are easy targets for massive online stereotyping and attacks. They won't be able to feel safe in their places of work when some backed-up influential male politicians could escape punishment after being accused of sexual violence, such as in the case of Ambassador Rami Adwan (Mostafa, 2023).

Anti-feminist backlash is rooted in the systemic lack of accountability at the national context. In fact, perpetrators may enjoy different types of immunity. The case of Nisrine Chahine, a prominent outspoken unionist and teacher, is quite revealing. Nisrine was dismissed from her work and later on arrested and incarcerated for claiming the rights of teachers to have decent pay and for denouncing in a Facebook post corrupt actions by the Minister of Education who refused to execute a judicial decision by the State Council in her favor (Alameddine & Antonios, 2023).

Policing Women's Bodies via Dress Code

Dress codes are frequently employed to control women's behavior or to convey messages including political signals. In Lebanon, a sectarian nation, swimsuits have previously been and continue to be used to indicate who is welcome and who is not in particular locations. A law dating back to the French Mandate prohibits women from wearing any bathing suit deemed indecent or revealing. This law, which was never reviewed or updated, is not implemented due to the evolution of the social norms in Lebanon. However, in a challenge between cultural homogeneity and diversity, and in the absence of a state of law, two sheikhs accompanied by male supporters asked a couple to leave Saida's beach, on May 14, 2023, claiming the woman was dressed "indecently." The beachgoers said that the men had thrown sand, tennis balls, and water bottles at them (L'Orient Today, 2023). Feminist groups and activists issued a statement condemning the attack on women's right to choose their dress code and to use public spaces without normative constraints and without being policed.

To highlight the attack on women's freedom of choice, and the dictation of new norms, activists were posting online posters and old photos of women posing in bikinis to promote tourism in Saida. They supported the manifesting activists by reposting videos and statements calling for the respect of human rights, and the right to freedom of belief and to difference. Many replies to those posts used hate speech to retaliate. Some activists called for a rally and press conference to protest the ban on women wearing swimsuits and imposing a dress code on Saida's Public Beach. Calls for a counterdemonstration also circulated on social media, to protest "in favor of modesty, virtue, and against nudity." The municipality mayor banned demonstrations on that day and installed banners along the public beach stating that "decent attire" must be worn. Many activists denounced that local groups have been able to impose social and cultural order on a given territory in a breach of democratic principles. The "survivor" had been going there for five years and had not faced any issues wearing her swimsuit until then. To support her and the right to freedom of expression, a group of about 70 feminists, activists, and journalists gathered in Saida from across the country. They were met with a coordinated response from the municipality, religious figures, and local supporters, males and females, who attacked them verbally and physically, inculcating them of moral degeneracy and of disrespecting the social and cultural norms and morals of the city (Jamal, 2023).

This incident reaffirms the harmful belief of some women and men, that using violence is acceptable to discipline others whose behavior is perceived as transgressing social norms (Van Veen et al., 2018) and defying the superiority of men (Boudet et al., 2013). Feminist activists are often accused of being agents of the enemy or "Westernized." They are also charged with being "against family values," a threat to conservative traditional values (Swisspeace, 2022, p. 2). This hate speech is used to intimidate and silence feminist activists, make them feel unwelcome in their country and towns, and incite violent reactions against their activism by demonizing them. It was repeatedly utilized during the October uprising and continues to be employed to curb the growing awareness among women and youth regarding their rights, particularly their political rights, contributing to the gradual dismantling of traditional political systems (Trad, 2021).

In that context, it was remarkable that no female politician, not even those who claim to be "change" MPs, nor any of the female members of the Saida Municipality Council, expressed support for the women or took a position on the matter, as they feared that they, too, would be attacked, insulted, and stigmatized. In support of those who demonstrated, just one MP, Marc Daou, showed up. He expressed solidarity and the need to uphold constitutional rights and laws rather than impose customary norms and "cultural" tendencies.

In a flagrant aggressive manifestation of one's toxic masculinity, some opposing protesters hit and injured Mohammad Chamseddine, a feminist activist protesting peacefully with the group. The stigmatization of men as driving women to abandon their traditional roles in society, which results in moral degeneration and delinquency, is another way that violent reactions toward men, who support women's equal rights and independence, are conveyed (Jewkes et al., 2015). This myth is frequently used to frighten and suppress individuals who advocate for equality, presuming that giving rights to women will take away rights from men. It is an attempt to preserve the current status quo of power dynamics, where men have more privilege, entitlement, power, and control than women (Roy, 2020).

Social norms are supported in a variety of methods, including coercion, overt punishment, institutional means of control (e.g., the police, religion), media influence, and more covert expectations and rules that are expressed in everyday encounters such as formal and informal education (Boudet et al., 2013). Imposed norms reinforce unilateralism and constitute a violation of human rights, specifically, the right to be different (United Nations Population Fund, 2021). Denying women the right to bodily autonomy, including the freedom to choose their attire, constitutes patriarchal oppression that restricts their freedom of expression and control over their own bodies. This can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety (United Nations Population Fund, 2021). Increasingly, reported dress restrictions are being imposed on women working for certain businesses, leading to discrimination and exclusion.

However, how can the judicial system uphold the rule of law and address such incidents of discrimination when veiled women are barred from becoming judges themselves and are denied the freedom to choose in flagrant violation of the constitution and the labor law? When women are forced to wear certain types of clothing, they are more likely to be seen as sexual objects, which can make them more likely to be targeted by sexual predators. Lebanon is seeing a decline in freedom of expression due to the economic and social crisis and the rise of sectarian discourse. In another incident, Myrna Maalouf's sculptures for World Breast Cancer Day were threatened by the "Soldiers of God," a Christian extremist group, who believed that the colors used referred to the rainbow flag that they consider a satanic symbol (Zaatari, 2023). Consequently, the municipality of Beirut removed the statues from Achrafieh under the pretext of nudity (Zaatari, 2023).

Status Quo Maintained

The structural discrimination that women face in Lebanon is perpetuated by traditional political authorities and decision-makers who perpetuate patriarchal norms in public life. They function as a movement that reinforces and supplements patriarchal sexist activities against women in general and female politicians in particular. They have conservative and misogynistic female supporters as well. For example, a member of parliament may back another member's sexist attack on a female colleague. To illustrate this, on September 30, 2020, the minister of justice faced sexual comments from deputy speaker Elie Ferzli and none of the attending ministers nor parliamentarians stood by her, not even her female colleagues. Ferzli's interruption was a sexist remark with sexual innuendo to make the minister uncomfortable.

This was not the only incident in the Parliament where women MPs were frequently interrupted, silenced, mocked, and attacked with sexist comments. The Speaker repeatedly made sexist and demeaning comments to silence women MPs while insinuating that they are unqualified and lack legislative knowledge. Moreover, a female MP's use of the term patriarchy to describe this set of facts sparked a clash between MPs, and the term was not recorded in the session proceedings as some male MPs objected to the use of the term

which they found insulting to religious authority. Recently, Nader Caspar, the head of the Beirut Bar Association, one of the top legal authorities, promoted homophobia, suppressed lawyers' freedom of expression, and gave a disparaging speech about violence against women. He portrayed survivors' stories as falsehoods, inevitably stigmatizing and silencing women, and enabling further impunity. He stirred controversy in a speech on domestic violence when he asked, "What prevents one individual from 'bullying' the other by claiming that they were beaten, kicked, or pushed? And what prevents them from stabbing themselves or hitting their head against the wall and saying that they are being beaten?" He accused an increasing number of women, motivated by financial gains, of falsely accusing their husbands of molesting and sexually abusing their children (Cherri, 2023).

This kind of victim blaming is intolerable: it perpetuates harmful beliefs that endanger women. Caspar abused his power as well by touching a college student's face without her consent and asking her to take the piercing off her nose when attending an event at the Bar Association. He gave another disparaging speech about being feminine and being masculine to dictate conduct and to reinforce misogynistic stereotypes (Megaphone, 2023a). Nonetheless, the repeated hateful misogynistic speeches of Caspar did not deter members of the Lebanese Council of Women and other so-called "feminist" NGOs from signing different types of Memoranda of Understanding with the Bar Association to empower women and advance gender equality. These Memoranda of Understanding sought to purple-wash Caspar's image, allowing him to recast himself as a defender of women's rights while preventing enraged feminists from pointing out his frequently destructive comments that promote women's oppression (Megaphone, 2023b). This indicates that patriarchy is not only a male issue, and that women have an important role in advancing progressive feminism (Lopes, 2019).

Conclusion

The explored cases reaffirm how the personal is political – they show how the bodies, voices, and lives of women are being used as battlefields to reconsolidate the power dynamics of the patriarchal system to avoid its perturbation. Misogynistic discourse and violence against women are powerful tools for backlash against feminist voices in Lebanon. These tactics are used to undermine the credibility of female politicians and activists, to shrink the spaces for women's mobilization, to silence those who advocate for gender equality and women's rights, and to restrain personal freedoms. While feminists have chosen nonviolence as a strategy for promoting peace and advancing gender equality, it is imperative that steps are taken to address these violent issues, create inclusive environments, and ensure that women can participate fully and safely in Lebanese politics. This includes measures to protect female candidates and activists from violence and harassment inside and outside formal political institutions and to promote gender equality and women's representation in political and public life.

It is also essential to enforce the rule of constitutional and not religious customary law, to accept and protect differences and the right to exercise personal freedom, and to abide by the international charters and conventions, which we are all equally entitled to. Feminism is not a zero-sum game; it benefits the whole of society and contributes to its sustainable development through the diversity of perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes. Therefore, any backlash on the progress made is a backlash on all of us.

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