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From Exclusionary to Participatory Feminist Peacebuilding in Lebanon: Examining the Roles of Refugees, Migrants and Women in All Their Diversity

Jasmin Lilian Diab, PhD

Introduction

Feminist and women's movements remain pivotal to catalyzing transformative reform towards gender equality, women's participation in peace processes, and access to justice in Lebanon. Collectively, albeit working across multiple spaces and scales, feminist movements in the country have traditionally paved the way for policy discussions on the issues of women, and larger discussions on peacebuilding at the national level. This opinion piece looks to explore how these movements, despite their exclusionary pasts, have developed into a safe and inclusive space for refugee and migrant women, as well as women in all their diversity (WiTD) across history. Delving into a post-2019 Lebanon, this piece explores how the feminist movement has been characterized by its ability to unify intersectional causes under one inclusive struggle throughout this period. Along these lines, the piece reflects on how the visibility of women in conflicts has led to a broader understanding of peacebuilding, and the ongoing struggle to find sustainable peacebuilding approaches.

Background

Women's mobilization in Lebanon dates back to the 1920s, when the Women's Union was established for women in Lebanon and Syria with the aim of shedding light on the plight of women across both cultural and social issues (Stephan, 2014). By the 1940s and 1960s, a first generation of feminists was formed of a group of elite men and women, who were largely involved in charitable activism (Daou, 2015). Throughout this period, feminist activism predominantly centered around women's access to education—a matter that would later lead to the emergence of women's organizations across religious, cultural, and social spaces (Daou, 2015).

As such, by 1951, though segregated across sectarian lines, unions of feminist organizations were established. The predominantly Christian Women Solidarity Association and the predominantly Muslim Lebanese Union of Women both emerged between 1951 and 1952 and were largely dominated by upper economic and social classes of women (Daou, 2015). In 1952, the Lebanese Council of Women was established; it was an umbrella organization of 170 mainly confessional and sectarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although their aim was to lead and give direction to the Lebanese feminist movement, their main achievements at the time were the provision social services and support to women (Daou, 2015). Largely intersecting with the global feminist movement of the 1970s, the fight for political participation, activism, and conversations on peacebuilding emerged in Lebanon around this period. These fights continue to shape the feminist movement as it expands to this day (Olsen, 2019).

Exclusionary and Elitist Approaches to Peacebuilding

By the 1990s, the Lebanese government formed a partnership with women's organizations in order to provide social welfare services and design the future of gender relations in the country (Olsen, 2019). Along these lines, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) was established in order to pave the way for an enhanced role for women in Lebanese society (Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation, 2022). The establishment of the National Committee for the Follow Up of Women's Issues and the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW) followed soon after (Daleel Madani, 2022). The establishment of the aforementioned entities catalyzed the establishment of feminist civil society organizations that aimed at institutionalizing feminist practices into NGOs and local networks. Prior to this, according to feminist activists and scholars, feminist movements in the region were largely dominated by "the intellectual bourgeoisie fighting for women's rights" (Daou, 2015). This "NGO-ization" not only impacted the internal structures of women's organizations, but also opened the doors for conversations on gender equity, women's economic and political empowerment, and also expanded the discourse on women's participation in civil society in general.

As women's rights and feminist organizations expanded in the civil society space, conversations on intersectionality in the feminist agenda emerged across the country. This primarily took form through conversations on the involvement of non-Lebanese women, and

women from across the gender spectrum. For decades in Lebanon, women from more vulnerable categories such as refugees and migrant domestic workers, have been excluded from discussions on women's rights. This has been largely because their needs continue to be framed under broader human rights conversations such as discussions on refugee rights, displacement, migrant rights, labor rights, and access to justice without accounting for their role in local feminist discourse and the local feminist landscape in Lebanon. Often dubbed "shadow feminism" by feminist scholars, this term is used to describe the often-unacknowledged feminisms of "women in Lebanon who are not Lebanese, for example, such as refugees and migrant workers, as well as Lebanese women who do not identify as activists or feminists" (Kaedbey, n.d., para. 3).

More Intersectional and Inclusive Feminism in Post-2019 Lebanon

An interesting turning point for Lebanon's feminist landscape, was the country's October 17, 2019 revolution and the period that followed. The 2019 revolution ignited calls from activists, lobbyists, and civil society alike. Expectedly, feminist demands and chants dominated the revolution, and had a strong and noticeable presence even at the early stages of the protests (Abou-Zahr, 2020). A 2019 paper published by UN Women, examining the first 58 days of protests, highlights the importance and significance of women's representation, roles, and demands among the protest movements in Lebanon (Wilson et al., 2019). Situating women's role within the broader women, peace and security framework, which recognizes women as political actors and peace and security leaders and brokers, the paper found that women comprised close to half of the protestors in Beirut and Tripoli, and at least one-third of the protestors in Nabatieh and Baalbek. The paper additionally found that from Tripoli to Tyre and across the Beqaa, women and girls across sectarian lines, from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, professions, physical abilities, and sexual orientations remained prominently and actively engaged in demonstrations. UN Women reportedly received testimonials from the ground of diverse groups of women (across Lebanese, refugee, and migrant communities) binding together to act as informal mediators between armed forces and protesters in regions such as Nabatieh, Tripoli, Baalbek, and Beirut, to negotiate access at roadblocks and to de-escalate tensions in provoked moments of conflict (Wilson et al., 2019). Calls to end the patriarchal system were rampant, alongside calls to condemn

gender-based violence (GBV), including violence against women and sexual harassment, as well as condemn the sectarian system, personal status laws, and economic inequality.

Importantly, the 2019 revolution created a “stronger and more united feminist front” according to an expert from Oxfam interviewed for the purpose of this article. Along these lines, she insisted that for the first time in many years, women from “all walks of life” (i.e., WiTD) marched hand in hand to call for the abolishment of the *kafala* (visa sponsorship) system, women’s rights to nationality, as well as broader gender equality for women from the LGBTQIA+¹ community. She explains:

Although Lebanese women in the feminist space have touched upon all these causes, it was remarkable to see so many grassroots organizations that were migrant-led taking part in the marches, the movements, and the feminist agenda on a broader level. Our insights from the ground tell us that Syrian and Palestinian refugee women took part in the protests as well, standing alongside Lebanese women to demand a civil status law, women’s rights to nationality for them and their children, an end to racism and discrimination, as well as rights for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Another expert from MOSAIC, one of Lebanon’s leading organizations working on LGBTQIA+ rights explains:

Queer, trans*, and lesbian women have always been part of the feminist movement, but never so visibly. Historically, the causes of women from our community have been framed under broader agendas. In the 2019 revolutions, we felt as though feminist actors bound together. For the first time in a long time, we felt as though women from our community were engaging alongside other feminist actors, and shaping what we hoped at the time would be conversations on peacebuilding in the long-term.

Demands across the feminist space since the experience of 2019 have largely become more intersectional and have been diligent in ensuring that they are as participatory as possible. An article published in *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* confirms these views and insists that the salience of these intersectional demands fighting against sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia, especially within the area of Beirut, is what distinguished the uprising and consequently, “forged solidarities” (Salame, 2021, para. 6).

As an activist from the feminist migrant worker-led organization Eгна Legna Besidet² informs the study, migrant women were at the forefront of protests, and this assisted in their engagement with other local feminist actors that they still work with to this day. She explains:

Egna Legna has been working for a long time. We have worked diligently to ensure that women's rights, particularly those from within the migrant domestic working community are upheld. The protests brought everyone in this space together. Some of the relationships and connections we fostered from our presence on the ground have yielded joint work in the feminist space to this date. These connections have fostered conversations on gender, peace, security, as well as conversations on sexism, racism, and discrimination in the feminist space.

This momentum of feminist peacebuilding and strong networking extended into the COVID-19 era, as women's rights organizations focused on documenting and shedding light on the gendered impact of the pandemic, as well as its impact on migrants, refugees, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. A number of feminist actors and women-led organizations provided basic needs assistance to women, including refugee women and migrant workers during this period. Key information about the pandemic was also circulated by organizations such as ABAAD and Fe-Male as a measure to contain the impact of the pandemic, particularly within vulnerable communities. Egna Legna Besidet worked alongside other local actors as well to shed light on the situation of migrant domestic workers during this period and raised funds in order to secure basic assistance for the migrant domestic working community.

Fundraisers were also launched by activists, women's rights organizations, LGBTQIA+ organizations, migrant domestic workers' organizations, and trans* individuals to help support their communities and the individuals affected by the Beirut Port explosions that occurred in August 2020. Funds were raised mainly for emergency assistance, such as shelter provision, food and cash assistance, mental health support, and protection services. Following the Beirut Port explosions, feminist coalitions were strengthened once again, alongside newly formed groups and organizations that shed light on the need for a gendered response to the explosions, and to raise funds to support women, members of the queer community, and migrant workers (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2020). Along these lines, the Feminist Humanitarian Network insisted that an adequate response to the Beirut Port explosions necessitated that feminists identify new ways of raising funds and to build alliances and coalitions to better address the emerging needs of their communities.

Despite positive recent experiences of alliance-building, for many feminist actors within the space, this brings up “sensitive questions around inclusion and prioritization” within the feminist community, as one interviewee stated. Discourse in the space has been reportedly split between those who believe that a feminist coalition should include WiTD to fight a common enemy (i.e., patriarchy), and those hesitating to engage in intersectional work on issues related to sexuality and the rights of migrant and refugee women due to their largely “unorganized” methods of work, coupled with their inability to make a larger political impact, as another interviewee explained. As an activist from MOSAIC insists:

It is a challenge—coalition building is a big challenge. This is not due to our converging priorities, but rather, our diverging ones. I understand that more traditional feminist actors are hesitant to be more inclusive. While I understand where they are coming from, however, I cannot accept it. The feminist movement, especially if it wants to work on peacebuilding and sustainable/durable approaches to peace, needs to break away from insisting that women are all the “same” in their priorities, and that women cannot have intersectional needs. Since 2019, we have seen so many positive examples of how peacebuilding can be intersectional, inclusive, and diverse even within a feminist space. We need to stay headed in that direction.

Ways Forward: “Our Causes are Diverse, Our Struggle is One”

Made popular at the International Women’s Day (IWD) march organized in Beirut in 2016, the slogan “our causes are diverse, our struggle is one” exemplified inclusivity, participatory approaches, and a unified feminist front. The banner of solidarity, carried across the country’s capital in 2016, as one interviewee explained, stood as a symbol of solidarity with struggles of WiTD across Lebanon. For years, the annual IWD marches have brought increased visibility to the priorities and needs of more marginalized groups, notably migrant domestic workers, queer and trans* people, and refugee women. Following a tumultuous and unprecedented period beginning in 2019, feminist actors continue to converge and diverge on a number of issues. However, if this challenging period for the country has taught us anything, it is that exclusionary practices challenge feminism’s very creed, its very essence, and its very mandate. Amid complex social and economic dynamics, the feminist movement in Lebanon continues to mirror a growing practice of inclusivity, intersectionality, and solidarity—a matter that has not only positively impacted the movement, but made it a “significant force to reckon with” according to my informants. For

diverse groups of women across Lebanon, civil society continues to constitute a pivotal space that ensures women's concerns are voiced, advocated for, as well as reflected in humanitarian and developmental programming. Along these lines, diversity is essential. It not only brings in new, creative thinking, but also ensures the participation of people who keep in mind the needs of those who might otherwise be forgotten in the feminist space though largely impacted by its mandate.

Notes

¹ LGBTQIA+ refers to members of the community who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, gender-diverse, gender fluid or other sexual orientations.

² Please visit: <https://egnalegna.org/>

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