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I Discovered Feminism in a Revolution

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Introduction

“Yasqot yasqot hokm el Az’ar!” (fall, fall, rule of thugs!) I heard Lebanese women chanting in the streets of Beirut at an all-women march on November 7, 2019, where I conversed with women from various sects, classes, occupations, and ages. I had never seen a more diverse gathering of women in Lebanon: The march encompassed various concerns, from young girls expressing their worries about employment opportunities after graduation to mothers urging their sons to steer away from violence. Lebanese citizens have been storming the country since October 17, 2019, in protest against a sectarian system and an entrenched political elite that they blame for leaving a major economic crisis unchecked, ignoring the country’s deteriorating public services such as education and healthcare, neglecting the country’s lack of civil rights, and refusing to acknowledge the erosion of basic infrastructure, such as access to clean water, electricity, and garbage removal.

During the first days of the protests I was abroad, but I eagerly watched live footage of activists calling for mass mobilization and continued protests. Lebanon had always been home. I had completed my university studies in political science in Beirut, where I had spent years wandering the city’s enticing streets with friends, discussing politics, and engaging in campus activities. When I graduated in 2012, I started working with various Lebanese government departments, which confirmed my suspicions of Lebanon’s governmental dysfunctionality. The antiquated internal work ethic and employee dynamics were very much reflected in the ministries’

brittle infrastructure and facilities. Ministries' efficacy was secondary, as their responsibility and loyalty were to themselves and their parties.

I learned firsthand the damage that sectarianism did and continues to do to Lebanese society. Lebanon's sectarian groups adhere to traits and ideals that offer little room for personal beliefs or ideas to develop outside of the group's dominant ideological framework. Hence, this is not an all-inclusive form of social representation. Rather, in the face of democratic ideals, sectarianism seeks to gain support on the basis of religion, creating reliance on the group leader rather than on the state. This group interaction can be understood through the concept of tribalism, a form of social organization that still has political valence in Lebanon today. Tribalism highlights the political dynamics among traditional tribes ruled by men, and it continues through a cycle whereby a leader inherits his power from his father. The argument therefore is that collectivized politics based on sects undermines the potential space available for the development of society more broadly, and specifically for women and minority groups.

My hopes of contributing to my society as a young, recent university graduate vanished — a sentiment I feel is shared by many of those who fall into the category of “youth.” I became disheartened with the lack of opportunities for growth, until I found myself, like many other young Lebanese, applying for jobs abroad. Sectarian groups mobilize and gain power in times when the state is weak, and this has created a vicious circle in Lebanon, where the weakened state continues to be further weakened by the growing power of sectarian groups. Lebanon has never been given the space to develop free from sectarian influences.

And so I eventually moved to Washington, D.C., to work for a think tank. There, my curiosity about Middle East politics and history grew. It was not long before I found myself moving to London to pursue my PhD and an academic career. My distance from my home country allowed me to move between my subjective self, or my emotional attachments to Lebanon, and my objective self, which prioritizes my career and rationalizes career opportunities as a fundamental aspect of my personal growth. My identity as a Lebanese in the diaspora became fragmented throughout the years, with the growing feeling that Lebanon did not reflect me or my aspirations (Maalouf, 2000).

Then came October 2019. I was rattled: After I had accepted that I would probably never return to a “better” Lebanon, the protests brought back vivid images of a Lebanon I loved and to which I wanted to return home. I immediately booked a flight and landed in Beirut to take part in what I saw as the first glimmer of hope. I walked down Martyrs’ Square and Riad al-Solh to learn what a “revolution” meant in these symbolic squares of courage and optimism. I recognized a collective voice demanding equal social, political, and economic rights for all women, which had been gestating in the margins of this patriarchal society. Women of all ages, sectarian allegiances, and class statuses were present. And more importantly, it was more than just Lebanese women: other marginalized groups, including migrant domestic workers, LGBTIQ people, people with disabilities, and refugees joined the protests. People had put aside their political parties and religious identities, and were now united in their calls for a dignified life. The once-powerful sectarian system that had divided and forced people against one another for years, marginalizing women and other minority groups, was being challenged by the joint mobilization of this diverse group of people, both Lebanese and non-Lebanese. I saw a yearning for societal change, and I learned more about my own people than I ever had. I felt overwhelmed by the number of Lebanese flags fluttering in the air, and by the lanterns floating over the ancient Roman baths, around the minarets of the al-Amin mosque, and above the Saint George cathedral. The sound of Lebanese revolutionary hymns gave voice to the people’s passions coupled with an incredible surge of love in remembrance of what it meant to be Lebanese.

However, to describe what the revolution is addressing requires a deeper analysis of the foundations of protesters’ claims, beyond just a description of the types of service and the general demands of the protesters in relation to the current situation. The protests were a spark of rage that brought people together, as the public squares downtown increasingly witnessed the mobilization and representation of grassroots initiatives demanding a secular government. I saw a parking lot transformed into a hub for dialogue, debate, and ideas about matters that the public had never engaged with so openly, such as the applicability of the constitution and potential changes to the electoral system. Also present were nonpolitically affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGO), such as arcenciel, an organization that supports underprivileged and marginalized communities; NGOs united against the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of

women and broader gender discrimination, such as KAFA (Enough); and NGOs that support vulnerable populations of non-Lebanese, such as the Migrant Community Center, which actively protests against the exploitative visa sponsorship system known as *kafala* (this system ties individual migrant workers to their employers, who also function as their visa sponsors). Also present were associations supporting people living with disabilities, and groups and representatives from many universities within Lebanon, including the Lebanese American University, the American University of Beirut, Université Saint-Joseph, and the Lebanese University. Under each of these universities were organized subgroups of students who were expressing various demands, including a refusal to inherit the current political state of affairs, which only magnified the degree of discrepancy between the younger generations and the ruling class.

The reason women in particular play such a critical role in these protests, I believe, is related to the degree of inequality they have endured for years. Firstly, as a Lebanese woman, I know that the judicial system does not sufficiently protect my limited personal rights, and that the rule of just laws and accountability are fundamental. I was stirred by the solidarity of young women uniting together against the common occurrence of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in Lebanon. They began to openly share their stories on social media and television, demanding that their experiences—which I too have encountered, both in public spaces and in the workplace in Lebanon—be recognized as part of their broader revolutionary demands. I had conversations with many women who were bolstered by this show of solidarity in the wake of the revolution to share their own personal experiences of sexual harassment and violence, of which they had once been ashamed or afraid to speak publicly. In one particular case, the revolution empowered approximately 300 women, who had been victims of sexual harassment by the same man, to speak up through messages and comments shared on Facebook and Instagram.ⁱ Such online accounts encouraged women to organize more marches across cities as they shared common demands.

I experienced the revolution with the concepts of sectarianism and tribalism in mind. Tribalism is a topic that I have examined in my PhD research. The demands foregrounded by women during the revolution made me recognize that tribalism, as a collective behavior passed down through generations of male-dominated politics, is an unavoidable subject that must be

addressed when we discuss the development of women's equal rights in Lebanon. I realized that tribalism was correlated with the limited effort to develop equal rights for women in Lebanon, as the male-dominated political parties only exercise their power insofar as it guarantees their sociopolitical authority. Although not all tribes exist in the same form today, tribalism as a male-dominated collective social and political behavior continues to govern the politics of collective identity by appealing to instinct-based attitudes associated with the need to survive. This group-oriented politics can be understood as a result of the artificial boundaries of statehood that exist across the Arab world due to the region's colonial history (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002). Thus, sectarian leaders tend to exert their power through Hobbesian principles (Pinker, 2011) of competition between individuals—for gain rather than cooperation, for ensuring safety rather than equal opportunities for all (including women), and for the preservation of reputation. Despite the institutional modernization of the Lebanese state, this political culture continues to hinder social and political change related to women's legal status, impeding any potential reforms as leaders take decisions that ensure their own power, and the power of those in their group, at the expense of others. As a result of this system, where individual rights are overlooked for the benefit of the group's or leader's agenda, women continue to be marginalized and are denied equal opportunities. The revolution is a force pushing against this discriminatory system.

Consequently, the contestation of blood ties is central to the revolutionary discourse. As I spoke to many protesters on the streets, their demands were numerous and diverse, and yet the revolutionary slogan "All means all" revealed one overarching demand: the removal of the political elite, and specifically its sons, who have been bequeathed the power of their fathers' political party or sect. The cultural dynamics of kinship are an essential component of the sectarian system in Lebanon, where patriarchy and connectivity collectively reinforce a specific societal hierarchy (Joseph, 1993). This hierarchy, which forces women to remain loyal not only to the sect but to their husbands and male family members, makes it difficult for women to achieve autonomy, especially considering the weakness, and in some cases absence, of social support services provided by the Lebanese state. As Judith Butler (2004) notes, the existence of institutions that can provide social support is a prerequisite for social transformation.

Unsurprisingly, protesters demanded the abolishment of the legitimacy and power of kinship-based authority figures and sociopolitical networks, arguing that clientelism, nepotism, and the accrual of money and assets within one ruling family are at the heart of the corruption that plagues the Lebanese government today. If the glorification of leaders and their sons (which clearly excludes women) continues, the current political culture will be perpetuated for generations. The time has come to recognize individuals for their merits and qualifications instead of their blood ties and family lineages. To lead the country toward becoming a civil state will require the just implementation of the rule of law, and the institution of a system of accountability for all political representatives and public officials. Accordingly, the development of the country beyond kinship ties necessarily involves the inclusion of women.

Despite the lack of sufficient representation of women in government, women have played and still play an important role in civil society, especially during the revolution. For example, on November 25, 2019, I attended a roundtable discussion organized by the Lebanese League for Women in Business headed by Asmahan Zein. Female lawyers, academics, and activists, as well as NGO and business leaders, came together at this roundtable to review recommendations for immediate and long-term solutions to improve women's status in the country. I was astounded by the number of women already playing a part in these efforts: joining legal support networks; reaching out to the diaspora to collect funds for various social and economic efforts, such as the WE Initiative; performing outreach to women in areas in need of support, including by helping local startups, such as tech companies or businesses promoting local production; providing mentorship opportunities and networking initiatives. The groups and organizations involved included Rural Entrepreneurs, the Digital Opportunity Trust, Arab Women in Computing, and Women in IT. Other areas where women play critical roles are health, education, food security, and economic and political leadership; for example, IM Capital provides support programs to assist women with early-stage businesses. During the first meeting, the organizers highlighted themes and efforts that could improve conditions for people across Lebanon with the help of organizations such as Reach. They decided that in the months ahead, they would mobilize to secure the provision of medical supplies in collaboration with the Syndicate of Pharmacists, as well as working to make mental health programs available for women.

Moreover, women also play a critical role in education, including mentorship programs to respond to local needs (such as the organization PartnersGlobal), as well as by collecting and donating books to students and families, securing funds from individuals, organizations, and embassies to cover school and university tuition fees for students who cannot afford them due to the US dollar shortage, and supporting lobbying efforts to convert tuition fees from US dollars into Lebanese pounds. In addition, women have mobilized to create and sustain food security networks, and to provide household services to communities, even helping families to plant their own gardens to sustain themselves. Another significant area to which women contribute is mental health programs, including a push to ensure that mental health programming staffed by women will be made available. Finally, outreach programs by universities including the American University of Beirut, University of Balamand, and Beirut Arab University have targeted women with backgrounds in politics, providing opportunities for dialogue and critical engagement to raise economic and political consciousness among the youth.

Finally, despite women's capabilities and effectiveness in providing solutions in times of crisis, it is important to say that more would be achieved if they were better represented in the state's decision-making process. The road to women's empowerment and equality in Lebanon is lengthy, and it will require major social, political, religious, economic, and cultural transformations. But the participation of women thus far has enthralled me. It has not only helped me to better understand my own fragmented identity, but it has prompted me to approach much of my research on Middle East political culture with a new lens, specifically in terms of how our history has been shaped by women's exclusion from it. Despite the uncertainty of what is to come, I feel incredibly proud to be a Lebanese woman, for I have never before fathomed the colossal strength and courage of which a woman is capable, bursting with extraordinary courage to fight and protest while experiencing pain and continuous struggle. What this experience has revealed is that women are the forgers of their own moral values, and that we can loudly fight for the just rule of law for political and social equality among all women and men. This is at the heart of the Lebanese revolution.

Notes

¹Stories were shared across many social media platforms and accounts against Marwan Habib beginning from November 28, 2019, and they continue to appear in 2020 as legal action is being taken.

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