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# Shaking Things Up in Lebanon: Women, Revolution, and the University

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The unplanned *intifada* that erupted across Lebanon on October 17, 2019, and spread like wildfire in the days and weeks to follow, evolved into an oppositional popular movement, exposing and rejecting the patriarchal sectarian system. No matter how things unfold in 2020, it is impossible to imagine a return to the status quo ante in Lebanon, particularly regarding the deplorable status of women. This article, which is a personal reflection and not a research essay, zooms in on the nexus between the university and gender during the *thawra* (revolution).

For anyone who experienced the revolution, it was a fearless, creative, peaceful, and diverse phenomenon. For those participating, the demands were simple, just, and unprecedented. In view of this vital, collective, and transformational experience, the function of the university seemed to pale in comparison. Increasingly, students and faculty began to question the relevance of the classroom, and the utility of the traditional university setting more broadly. The Independent University Professors Association, for example, aligned with the Students of October 17 to become an instrumental force for change during the *thawra*. Dozens of pop-up teach-ins emerged each week during the remainder of the fall of 2019 to educate, raise awareness, and plan the next steps of the popular movement. College professors, students, lawyers, artists, civil rights leaders, and others convened to think out loud, share ideas, create, and converse in open public spaces across Beirut and other Lebanese cities. Many felt that Lebanon was evolving at long last into a nation with a shared language, common values, and collective aspirations. The streets, and

not the universities, were setting the agenda and calling for a future that was more pragmatic, more inclusive, and more hopeful than anything before. And women were at the center of it.

Alongside the calls against corruption, political ineptitude, and sectarianism were demands for women's equality with regard to citizenship rights, personal status laws, gender-based violence, and the *kafala* (visa sponsorship) system. In Lebanon, the personal status laws fall under the jurisdiction of the religious rather than civil courts. There is no civil code to deal with marriage, divorce, custody, alimony, and inheritance—each of which has been a source of grave injustices for women. Lebanese women cannot pass their citizenship on to their children; marital rape is not criminalized by law, nor are there adequate protections to safeguard women from sexual abuse; and human trafficking and forced prostitution, which primarily affect women, are endemic in Lebanon. Women's participation in governance remains dismal, as multiple attempts to implement a women's parliamentary quota have been defeated. In brief, there is a long and deep history of gender rights abuses in Lebanon.

So, when the revolution began, it was no surprise that so many women took to the streets chanting "Our revolution is feminist." The image of a woman protester side-kicking a male security guard in the groin became an early symbol of the revolution, reinforcing the push against patriarchy, and by association against the sectarian system bolstered by religious institutions and the elite. The women participating in the protests in unprecedented numbers were neither relegated to, nor chose only to perform, gender-normative tasks such as cooking for other protesters or cleaning the demonstration square. Nor were they constrained by their identities as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters. The fearless and creative leadership of women activists during the *thawra* has shaken things up across Lebanese institutions, universities included.

From the early days of the revolution, the anger and frustration of the thousands of protesters across Lebanon were directed at the sectarian *za'ims* (leaders) and their cronies, whose corruption, negligence, and (often illegal) accumulation of wealth had set the stage during the first week of the *thawra*. The political leaders—overwhelmingly men—quickly became associated with a deepening greed and political ineptitude. Their fear tactics, however, were no longer working: protesters ceased to be afraid. The threat of civil war and sectarian strife no longer worked either,

as this popular chant, which rang out in cities from Tyre to Tripoli, shows: “*Intu al-harb al-ahliyyi / nahna al-thawra al-sha’abiyyi*” (you are the civil war / we are the popular revolution).

In the meantime, universities across Lebanon reacted to the immediate disruption of normal life in the country. With safety as the key objective, universities differed on how much to publicly react to the *thawra*, in other words, whether or not they should join the mass criticism of the government, or if they should remain politically neutral to what was happening on the ground. The mass demonstrations and road blockades forced universities to issue daily decisions on whether to fully close or not, whether to follow ministerial decrees or not, and whether staff and faculty should show up on campus, even if classes were suspended. New academic calendars were proposed, changed, and revised again to account for missed days and further disruptions. Given that so many students were either involved in the protests or lived far from campuses, some without access to the Internet or computers, delivery of course material was extremely challenging. Faculty were asked to be lenient with class attendance, utilize alternative pedagogical methods, and create new assessments that deviated from traditional exams. And while the fall 2019 semester was miraculously salvaged for the great majority of university students, the relevance of classroom education ultimately seemed compromised.

With their missions to educate, to empower, and to prepare youth for the future, universities in Lebanon were now at an uncomfortable juncture. Despite innovation and change, universities were generally not prepared for the extensive overhauls demanded by the popular revolt. Nowhere was this more evident than with the question of women. While accessibility for and inclusion of women have improved, and while gender curricula, women’s centers, and Title IX offices exist at some Lebanese universities,<sup>1</sup> gender equality is still a long way off. Here are some reasons why:

1. As institutions, universities are inherently conservative and slow to change. Despite their teaching missions, they are governed by bureaucracies that are part and parcel of the financial, legal, and political realities of the country they function within.
2. Women’s rights are rarely the main goal or linchpin objective of most universities.

3. Women's/gender issues tend to be isolated, even ghettoized, in demarcated units such as gender institutes, women's studies programs and courses, or gender equality workshops.
4. Title IX, which prohibits any form of sexual discrimination, came late to Lebanon, and often with strings attached. Issues of sexual harassment and reporting can be mired in political/sectarian interventions, with fears of backlash.
5. Unequal representation between women and men in positions of administration and university governance is the norm, with men accounting for the overwhelming majority of the membership of boards, upper administration and key posts, councils, and committees.
6. The gender wage gap, job grades, and promotions are rarely key performance indicators of equity or assessment at universities in Lebanon.
7. Facilities and campus planning rarely prioritize safe and necessary spaces for women, including sufficient bathrooms or lactation rooms.
8. Women overwhelmingly occupy positions traditionally associated with conservative gender roles, such as assistants, secretaries, and nurses; even female academics or administrators are often expected to serve or do clerical duties.
9. The unjust and racist *kafala* system in Lebanon is mirrored in the universities, which rely on migrant foreign women to clean campuses at very low wages, abusing internationally accepted labor laws.
10. In the end, universities function within Lebanon, and consequently within its antiquated legal code for women and its sectarian patriarchal culture, which can occasionally translate into favoritism to appease political and religious *za'ims*.

As the *thawra* played out with a disproportionately large percentage of university women (students, faculty, and staff), it became clear that they had less to lose, more to gain, and certainly a lot to say. Interestingly, the fear tactics of politicians ("beware of impending civil war") were mirrored in the fear slogans of the sectarian patriarchy ("shame on you"). With amazing courage and spirited drive, these women stepped out, picked up the megaphones, led the sit-ins, and were visible on social media, despite the potential gendered repercussions. Many young female

students—some who had never before self-identified as activists, or even as politically aware—not only joined the protests, but stayed up all night, closing roads and planning for the next day, and the next day, and the next. Some hid their intense involvement from their parents, who they believed would have prevented them from being so active. Others involved in the downtown Beirut sleep-ins lived in tents with fellow protesters, but were subjected to accusations on social media of fornication and orgies simply because they were women. Female faculty and staff members exhibited excessive worry over their early participation in the *thawra* for fear of retribution by their departments or units. Students from the LGBTQ community—also refreshingly visible in the protests—continued to tiptoe around homophobic and transphobic campuses in a country where homosexuality is still considered a crime. And in one highly visible case, a male university professor wrote a misogynistic rant against female students who cursed Lebanon’s president. Noteworthy in his statement were the obsessive, graphic, and vituperative sexual references to the female body. Even though appropriate action was taken by the university where he taught, the cat was out of the bag. In all these examples, there has been pushback and solidarity from the female-led *thawra*. But to what end?

Times of great flux are opportunities for bold decisions; there is much to look forward to as regards improving women’s rights within universities. Raising awareness about inequality is key, as is creating and empowering Title IX offices to handle issues of sexual harassment and other gender-based violations. Hiring more women in academic and administrative posts is a must; funding women and gender-sensitive programming is both strategic and supported by international grant agencies; providing safe and private spaces is required; opening up the curricula to mainstream women’s and gender issues is vital; and finally, ensuring that university policies are upfront about issues of discrimination and harassment based on gender or sexual orientation is crucial. Universities must provide safe forums to discuss gender and sexuality—which are still often categorized as “shameful” topics by political and religious leaders. But gender equity can no longer be relegated to a to-do list for later. The citizens are impatient, and the days of paying only lip service to gender equity are coming to an end. The old system has been exposed, and women are leading the way forward. Transforming the laws that govern a country will take time. Gradually fostering a culture that is more inclusive and accepting will take time. But the

momentum is here. And the time is now. It has been surprising and uplifting to witness how justice recognizes itself in others. Indeed, across Lebanon, and most significantly in public spaces, diverse peoples have discovered that female solidarity translates into strength. Justice knows no turning back. But will universities heed the call and be inspired to take bold steps to prioritize and ensure gender equity? Until then, universities cannot be the vital and relevant institutions that Lebanon and its people, especially the young, deserve.

*The observations made here are personal and are not on behalf of the university.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Title IX is a key component of American civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational program or activity that receives US government funding. Title IX offices at universities seek to promote and ensure gender equity and inclusion for students, staff, and faculty. They also review, investigate, and work to resolve reports of sexual assault and harassment as well as gender-based inequity.