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# The International Feminisms Festival: Mainstream Feminism Confronted with its Colonial Legacy A Personal Reflection

Vanessa Zammar-Bonvin

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Lebanon is often described as having a “vibrant” civil society. While such a description sounds promising, it presents drawbacks that equally affect women’s rights and feminist organizations. The number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country has boomed since the 90s post-civil war era and has continued to increase every year since. As much as this may sound like a good sign for freedom of speech and engagement, it contributes to the depoliticization of structural issues and the inhibition of mass mobilization (Jad, 2003).

Moreover, NGOs often depend on international donors, who influence their programmatic and budgetary choices. The geographical and sociopolitical distance between the donors and the field deflects fund allocation and project implementation from the actual needs on the ground.

In other words, donors define their own goals, which might not match the needs on the ground (AbiYaghi et al., 2019). The resulting tensions, as I will show in this article, came to the surface during the first International Feminisms Festival that took place in Beirut in February, 2020.

While internal debates are necessary for a political movement to be fruitful, I argue that, for some feminist branches, these “debates” are not so much debates, but rather indicate the

reproduction of oppressive and internalized structures such as colonial, racial, and classist domination.

During the four-day event, participants of various identities from nine Arab countries, France, and Canada gathered to discuss a variety of topics ranging from the history of feminist movements to the role of women in revolutions, to feminisms in the performing arts and the role of men in feminist struggles. Panel discussions were organized alongside feminist film screenings. The Festival, funded by the French Institute (Institut Français), took place in the French Institute's Beirut facilities. A joint committee from Université Saint-Joseph (USJ), the French Institute, Lebanon Support, the Joumana Haddad Freedoms Center, and the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University selected the speakers and artists. Aside from the French Institute, which is directly affiliated with French donors and actors, the other institutions are all considered local organizations. However, most of their partners are European (Orient Institute Beirut, Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, Swiss Embassy, European Endowment for Democracy) or North American (The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, International Center for Transitional Justice). This has economic and sociopolitical consequences, as donor relations and regulations shape the discourse of, and the audience that attends such an event. For example, the event's location, behind the concrete walls of the French Embassy, and the fact that simultaneous translation was only offered between Arabic and French, not English, resulted in a number of exclusions, including the large population of English-speaking students in Beirut. Although French used to be the main educational and academic language, a shift toward English-speaking institutions has been

operationalized in the last decades in addition to the wider use of Arabic, making French a mostly elite tool of communication (El-Hage, 2019).

As the name of the festival acknowledges the multiplicities within the feminist movement, some participants displayed how historical, geographical, and cultural contexts and power dynamics influence the feminist movement. During the roundtable “Feminism and Human Rights: A Common Struggle?” that gathered Magda Elsanousi, an activist and gender specialist from Sudan and Bochra Triki, an LGBTQ activist from Tunisia, the latter brought up the example of Tunisia’s often-praised post-Independence state feminism. She stressed how former president Habib Bourguiba implemented policies oriented towards diplomacy and external relations that, in reality, did not leave room for other voices, targeted mostly urban elite women, and lacked grassroot initiatives that would have benefited wider segments of the population. Triki analyzes Bourguiba’s posture as paternalistic, illustrated most clearly by the now well-recognized scene during which he removed a Tunisian woman’s veil in “order to liberate themselves.”

The roundtable “Criticism of Systemic Patriarchy within Social, Cultural, and Historic Diversities” brought together Leila Awada, a lawyer and founding member of Kafa, a feminist organization against violence and exploitation, Eric Macé, a French sociologist, Hana El Jaber, member of the Union of Jordanian Women, and Fatima Oussedik, an Algerian sociologist and anthropologist. During the roundtable discussion, Oussedik voiced a statement that is key to analyzing the history of feminist movements and overcoming existing tensions that pit feminisms against each other: “Universal aspirations do not mean universal responses.” This sentence anchors the movements in the region and debunks arguments that accuse feminists of playing the game of western countries. For a long time, feminist discourse was monopolized by

white/western women or western-centered policies that were implemented using a top-down approach. In the past decades, however, voices from the global South, and from ethnic and religious minorities living in the west, have started to penetrate mainstream feminist discourse, widening the spectrum of feminist possibilities. Oussedik's comment astutely highlights that such a plurality of feminist voices does not negate the potentiality for a universal goal—in other words gender equality—but rather points to the contextually-specific modalities used by feminists around the globe to achieve gender equality and emancipation from oppressive social structures.

Grounding regional feminisms also featured in the roundtable entitled “Feminism—One Hundred Years of Contestation: Continuities, Divergences and Transformations” that included Joumana Merhi, Director of The Arab institute for Human Rights Lebanon, activist Nada Moghaizel via video, and Asma Lamrabet, a self-described “Arab-Islamic feminist” from Morocco. Asma Lamrabet explains that while the fight against patriarchy has been continuous throughout history, non-European feminist contributions, such as the ones from the Arab region and African countries, have been left out of history books. This resulted in the belief that feminism was imported to the region and that there is only one “true” feminism: Western liberal feminism. It goes without saying, however, that Arab and Islamic feminisms did not follow European feminism but were born at the same time and evolved as part of a broader anti-colonial posture (Ali et al., 2020). Wadud (2009) considers that these stereotypes specifically burden Islamic feminists with a “dual mandate,” as they must address inequality within Muslim laws, culture, countries, and communities, while simultaneously challenging the idea that their cultures are not competent enough to fully participate in global pluralism and meet demands for democracy and

human rights (p. 100). Wadud (2009) reminds us that the struggle against patriarchy is not limited to male supremacy and that we should battle against the belief that there is one way of knowing and doing. In other words, we must continue to challenge Western-centric knowledges embedded within a colonial framework as the only way of knowing.

Lamrabet's comments echo Oussedik's, as she calls for a multi-versal feminism, where everyone fights for autonomy and liberty through different modes of action. In relation to the region, this is particularly important as it counters the common binary between secular feminism and Islamic feminism. Rather than opposing feminisms, Badran (2011) suggests that Islamic and secular feminisms "have been mutually re-enforcing" (p. 82). Religion is no stranger to feminist movements in the region as Egyptian feminists "first drew from it in seeking the restoration of their rights as women that Islam had granted them" (p. 80). Christians operated in a similar fashion. Contemporary Islamic feminists suggest a return to the original texts, the Qur'an and sunna, through another reading or *ijtihad*, that washes away the 'ulama's sexist interpretations (Ali et al., 2020). With their religious and social sciences expertise, they examine equality and justice principles. The reinterpretation of the texts follows three pillars according to Badran (2009): (1) revisiting verses of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation (i.e., male superiority resulting from interpretation of the narrative around Creation in the Garden of Eden); (2) citing verses that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men; (3) deconstructing verses attentive to male and female difference by considering difference in terms of plurality and not superiority. On a broader level, Islamic feminism consists of reviewing the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and the *tafsir* (Qur'anic commentary); revisioning history from a woman's standpoint as classical and post-classical interpretations are based on male-centered

questions; producing a global feminist thought based on the *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism) as foundational of equality between humans (Ali et al., 2020).

In retracing the context of the emergence of Islam, some scholars consider the Qur'an a breakthrough in the patriarchal modalities that were operating in 7th century Arabia (Adaime, 2019; Wadud, 2009). This lens understands Islamic writings as a trajectory to equality between humans rather than immutable laws (Ali et al., 2020; Adaime, 2019; Wadud, 2009). In doing so, Islamic feminists question the monopole of neoliberal and neo-colonial ideas about women's emancipation and call for the plurality of emancipatory modalities, as embodied by the Zapatistas' slogan "One No many Yeses" (Federici & Linebaugh, 2018). They push back against a univocal feminism, one that prioritizes the cause of some (white middle/upper-class cis heterosexual women) over others.

Triki, Oussedik, and Lamrabet's comments, which all consider the various contextual factors that affected feminist movements across the region, stood in contrast to some of the other panel discussions. Specifically, historical context was often neglected in those panels that contested the idea of linking Islam and feminism, paralleling the hostile conversations currently taking place in several European countries regarding Muslim women's participation in the public sphere and their veiling practices. Such discussions—which pit Islam against feminism without appropriate contextualization—are evidence of the pervasive Islamophobia (as well as racism and classism) that undergirds both right- and left-wing circles in Europe and feminism more broadly, and highlight how coloniality and white supremacy shape today's movements and undermine the legitimacy of extra-European and non-white feminist politics. For example, the performance of an extract of Joumana Haddad's play "The Cage" (Haddad, 2016) that took place

during the Festival, and her subsequent moderation of the all-male roundtable “Men and feminists: an unlikely engagement?” displayed the same uneasiness with, and stigmatization about Islam that is commonly found within the discourse of hegemonic liberal feminism. The performance foregrounds a woman wearing a *niqab*, who describes herself as feeling “like the garbage picked up by the garbage collector,” and living a purposeless life in which her only action is “to steal air.”

The above depiction echoes with the recurrent conversation in Europe about the veil that portrays veiled women as passive, not as agents of their own lives. It masks the structural oppressive forces that impact all women, and the fact that all women are oppressed, shamed, harassed, and killed no matter how they dress, be it in a mini skirt, a hijab, a pair of jeans, or a jumper. In the current context, an International Festival of Feminisms gathering participants from Europe and Arab countries should have presented the challenges faced by Muslim and Arab women in Europe alongside all women, including European women, in order to draw a bridge between various women’s struggles. However, not only was collective gender inequality overlooked, one of the roundtable participants displayed cultural essentialism regarding the Muslim population in France, specifically.

These tensions came to the fore during a roundtable moderated by Haddad, entitled “Men and feminists: an unlikely engagement?” that included Eric Macé, a French sociologist, Anthony Keedi, a psychologist at ABAAD, and Akl Qawit, a journalist at Annahar. The diversity of speakers in terms of backgrounds, countries, and ideas spoke to the “internationality” and plurality of the festival. However, inviting men to lecture about feminism raises some questions. A 2018 study across 23 countries has shown that globally 69% of speakers at events are men



(Galvez, 2019). While feminism should include men, the modalities of their inclusion should not reproduce everyday power dynamics that the movement, at its core, is struggling against. In an event gathering women from all around the region to discuss feminism, inviting a French sociologist, a white man, specifically, was not constructive considering that white men from Western Europe generally dictate the general terms of engagement, no matter the subject or issue. These questionable power dynamics surfaced specifically when Haddad questioned the Arab men on the panel about their feminist engagement, but did not question Macé's commitment to the movement. Rather, Haddad asked Macé the following question: "In France it must be more common than [in Lebanon] for men to call themselves feminists, [can you] tell us more about it?"

The problem with this question lies in the assumptions that it makes about "who" can be considered a "good feminist" subject, and whose commitment is inherently questionable. The question implies a hierarchy between "advanced Europeans" versus "non-advanced Arabs." In the same way that having a "dual" identity, for example as an Arab woman, does not make a person implicitly intersectional, neither does being a "French man" de facto equate with being a feminist. Macé's answer to Haddad's question raised even more problems: "Indeed," he responded, "France is not a patriarchal society anymore." Ironically, at that very moment in France, the infamous César 2020 awards ceremony had presented Roman Polanski—a film director wanted in the United States on multiple counts of rape and sexual assault of a minor with a reward, despite the multiple calls condemning his nomination made by feminist associations. The audience highlighted the inconsistencies of this statement during the question and answer session, and they interrogated Macé regarding the high rate of femicide in France,

and the lack of women in top positions in politics and businesses, among other issues. Despite these reactions, the sociologist maintained an “us versus you” posture, justifying his stance by stating that for a society to be patriarchal it means “inequality before the laws and biological/natural hierarchy arguments” which “in France we do not have anymore, and you, in Lebanon, you have both.” He abruptly drew a line between two seemingly far-away worlds.

Haddad ended by asking Macé whether Muslim men could be feminists. Pointing fingers at one religion, as Haddad’s question does, erases the systematic nature of patriarchy, and instead associates patriarchy with specific cultural/religious traits. The question was not, however, as problematic as the sociologist’s answer:

[B]ecause French women (i.e., white/non-Muslim) are more feminist than Muslim ones, and French men (i.e., white/non-Muslim) are less [feminist] than their fellow women compatriots, we can assume that Muslim men are less feminist than all of them. In other words, Macé proposes a hierarchy of “possible” feminist subjects, with the ideal white subject (in this case, white feminist women) at the top, followed by the less ideal feminist subject (the brown Muslim woman) and finally, the “impossible” feminist subject: the brown Muslim man. His answer of course was not backed by any scientific data, and is a product of Islamophobic discourse circulating in France. Operationalizing feminism in this way is known as femonationalism (Farris, 2017), which is defined as the instrumentalization of feminism by nationalists to secure a hierarchy between certain nations and populations. Many feminists, unfortunately, share these views, stigmatizing Islam as a religion that oppresses women. Further, femonationalism stems from the perspective that secularism has freed women, rejecting any consideration that religion can be compatible with feminist principles. But such a view ignores

the fact that institutions, especially democratic nation-states, are not neutral; rather they reflect historically and culturally situated morals and belief systems. As such, democracies should be understood as malleable to local beliefs and customs (Henry, 2017). These “secular” feminists tend to consider “Muslim women” as a homogeneous group excluded from the national community and lacking agency. This view builds from age-old orientalist perceptions that have supported colonialist conquest in the name of “civilization” and women’s liberation.

But “do Muslim women really need a saving?” (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Rather than saving, Muslim women and women from the global South more broadly need their struggles, voices, and activism to be acknowledged (Vergès, 2019). This perception of Islam being antagonistic to women’s rights is problematic in three ways: first, it denies the persistent gender inequality in non-Muslim contexts and the decades of struggle it took for women in these regions to get where they are today. Second, it ignores the work of prominent feminists in the region who have worked on re-interpreting religious texts and laws as part of their feminist engagement. Lastly, it builds from a posture of victimization along a common and universal struggle. Defining women as a single, homogenous group sharing oppression and victimization de-politicizes and de-historicizes feminist analyses and struggles (Mohanty, 1988). It avoids any geographical and historical specificity, which is necessary to properly document the evolution of feminism and feminist demands over time in relation to socioeconomic and political change. To condemn religion as the primary reason for economic underdevelopment and women’s unequal status reproduces imperialist ideologies that overlook economic and political dynamics (Mohanty, 1988).

We must deconstruct this colonial legacy that continues to dominate feminist spaces of engagement to genuinely make room for various voices to be raised without fear of being silenced in the name of women's rights. Françoise Vergès's (2019) *Decolonial Feminism* is an important volume to consider for such work. Decolonizing feminism requires addressing the structures within which feminism operates, and specifically, it asks us to reflect on how the liberation of some women depends on the oppression of others. For example, in Lebanon women are marching for their rights while migrant domestic workers clean their homes and care for their children under the *kafala*, or visa sponsorship system. Deeply intersectional, decolonial feminism calls for the deconstruction of all power dynamics simultaneously.

If we are aiming for women's liberation, we cannot afford repression, silencing, and eradicating difference within the movement. We must think about the economic and political forces behind our organizing, the locations, and languages in which we speak, as well as our positionalities. Thinking that there is one path to liberation only reproduces age-old colonial and imperial frameworks which have subsisted through generalizations about the 'Other.' To develop political solidarity, we must think in our own terms about our political commitment to end all forms of oppressions. And it is only by considering the multiplicity of voices that we will be able to address the myriad of oppressive forces and bring the radical change that our societies profoundly need.

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