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The Lebanese Woman, Reenvisioned

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In an attempt to pacify the warranted wrath of the Lebanese people over his election in the aftermath of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation, Prime Minister Hassan Diab took an unprecedented approach: he vowed to incorporate women.¹ In a December 2019 article, Deutsche Welle quoted Diab as saying, "We are striving for a government that is different from previous governments in Lebanon. This concerns both the inclusion of technocrats and the proportion of women" (Sanders, 2019). On January 21, 2020, the new government of 20 ministers was announced—six of them women.

While this executive decision fails to compare to other governments around the world that have already evolved to the point of electing women as prime ministers and presidents, it did set a regional record: Lebanon became the first Middle Eastern country to have six female government officials in its cabinet (breaking its own record of four female government officials the

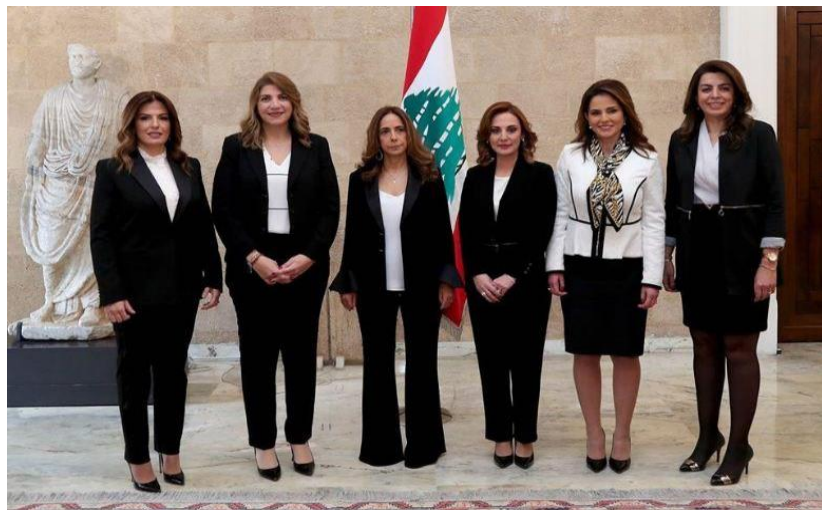


Figure 1. The six women of the new cabinet, pictured on January 22, 2020. AFP.

previous year), as well as the first Middle Eastern country to choose a woman as defense minister (Yassine, 2020). The fact of the matter is that women, and the abundance of support and

representation they had quickly garnered during the revolution, had forced the Lebanese government to work toward reforming the country into a nation that catered for everyone, as opposed to the fortunate few. The measures taken to include women would have never been considered had it not been for the powerful roles that women had played in facilitating change since the start of the revolution.

One of the revolution's most prominent slogans, "the revolution is a woman" (or "the revolution is female"), is backed by hundreds if not thousands of pictures of women on the front lines of the Lebanese protests. Lebanese online magazine *The 961's* 2019 article "Meet the real women of the Lebanese revolution," written by Maria Zakhour, lists as many as 28 roles that Lebanese women have adopted over the course of this revolution, including feminist activists and

artists who march in the hope of sharing their vision of a society that is not seen through the lens of toxic patriarchy; young and aspiring female students who skip classes to teach corrupt men a lesson; influencers who use their voice and presence on behalf of women denied a voice; the women of science, doctors and environmentalists, who protest for the sake of a vision of earth as sustainable; housewives



Figure 2. Protesters chant slogans during a protest in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyeh. October 20, 2019. Aziz Tahar, Reuters.

who put up tents to feed people; and mothers who march not for only themselves, but for their children and their children's children. Indeed, women of different age groups, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and political parties have stood together in the name of women's solidarity, marching with one another to create a future that ensures their basic needs and rights. Of course, not all women have been represented equally in this revolution. Transwomen, for example, have been denied the same platform to voice their concerns as cisgender women. Many gender-

centered demands have been trans-exclusionary, and some have neglected the concerns of queer women and queer people in general. That said, the eventual inclusion of slogans and chants that called on protesters to fight homophobia and transphobia has served as a first step toward an intersectional politics. It is thus only fitting that women's refusal to stand on the sidelines, or to be pushed to the margins by oppressive forces, should be mirrored in art that celebrates their resilience for change.

Among other things, the revolution has provided Lebanese women with the opportunity to liberate themselves from the gender norms they are pressured to uphold by their patriarchal society. The women featured in Lebanese resistance art



have been and continue to be redefined to symbolize

Figure 3. Women protesters stand in a row in front of the Lebanese Army during a protest in Zouk Mosbeh, north of Beirut. AFP.

power and strength instead of submissiveness and vulnerability. Mary-Lynn is among the artists who refuse to dwell on the beauty of the women they portray, instead opting to give them a much-needed voice.

Her 2019 Instagram piece (Figure 4) is just one example of the wave of art that has taken Lebanon by storm following the revolution. This artwork features a group of people, most of whom are blindfolded or have their eyes closed and their mouths shut. The unique exception is a woman standing at the front of the crowd. She has the word “revolution” written on her neck in English, a Lebanese flag painted on each cheek, and a Lebanese flag draped over her shoulders with “ثورة” (revolution) written multiple times across it in black. Of the 12 figures featured, this woman is the only one with both eyes and mouth wide open, as though screaming in the



Figure 3. @_artisticmary, #لبنان_ينتفض, November 4, 2019.

face of injustice, to which she is not blind. The sharp contrast is established even further by the colors of the woman’s clothes (the colors of the Lebanese flag) compared with those of the mass behind her (a neutral, unprovoked brown). The artist’s decision to cover the woman in the Lebanese flag is an apt representation of women as the embodiment of the nation. Through her art, Mary-Lynn celebrates Lebanese women, not for their beauty, but for being the voice of reason and strength in a crowd of blind trust and fear.

Mary-Lynn is not the only one to celebrate Lebanese women as those who will see to the revolution’s victory. A three-piece art sequence published by Ornella Jaffar on her Instagram profile in 2019 (Figures 5–7), captioned “MyLebnan,” proposes a similar notion. While the triptych does not include any recognizable female figure, the three pieces feature the hand(s) of a woman—as can be determined from the elegance of the poses as well as the manicured nails—managing the liberation of her country.

In the first piece (Figure 5), she opens a cage to free a white pigeon bearing a cedar tree on its chest from a cage of flying pigs. The pigs are meant to represent Lebanese politicians and corrupt money. In the second image (Figure 6), she holds an hourglass bearing the words “72

hours” in Arabic, referring to the 72 hours the then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri claimed he would need to reform Lebanon. Finally, the third piece (Figure 7) features the hands of a woman sewing a heart-shaped cushion that has “Lebanon” written on it in Arabic. Jaffar’s decision to feature a woman’s hand as opposed to a man’s suggests that the fate and future of Lebanon are in the hands of the Lebanese woman—she is a force to be reckoned with, but not for her antagonism or animosity. Instead, the peacefulness and patience represented in Jaffar’s art heavily contrasts with the Lebanese militia, who continue to use violence and aggression to send their message. Thus these images reveal that there is no room for such backwardness in the healing of our country.

Fatma Kassem’s 2010 book *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory* suggests that the female body is remembered in terms of strength and rejuvenation by women and men alike that have faced or are currently facing oppression and injustice—for example, Palestinians at the hands of Israelis, or Lebanese at the hands of their own government. Women are given the responsibility to rebuild destroyed homes as well as birth new life. Most importantly, the Palestinian woman has become a representation of the nation as a whole (Kassem, 2010). The same is true of Arab women living in countries that are facing injustice and oppression, as indicated in the artistic activism produced in those countries—from literature to music and art. Kassem writes of ethno-political and religious conflicts where an “intrusion into national territory is perceived as an intrusion into women’s bodies” (p. 157). With this link between the woman and



Figure 6. @ornella.jaffar,
/01MyLebnan. October 21, 2019.

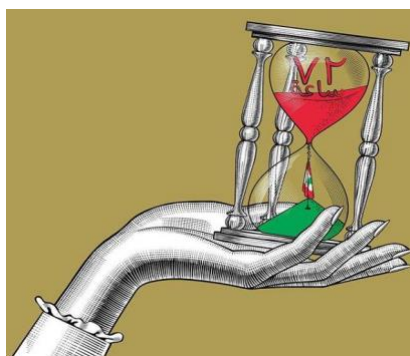


Figure 5. @ornella.jaffar,
/02MyLebnan. October 21, 2019.

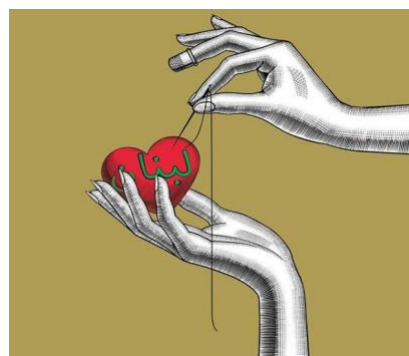


Figure 4. @ornella.jaffar,
/03MyLebnan. October 22, 2019.

the motherland established, the woman becomes integral to the establishment of a country's identity, providing women with a role in society beyond that of a man's other (her father's daughter, her husband's wife, her son's mother, etc.).

Since the start of the Lebanese revolution, dozens of pieces of art featuring women as a symbol of the oppressed have emerged. Ivan Debs's artwork, found on his Instagram profile, is a powerful example. The most striking of his Instagram pieces is his 2019 work (Figure 8) captioned "Stand strong Lebanon part II," in which he portrays a woman breaking the chains of her oppressors. The woman is dressed in red, which is often considered the color of revolution and is one of the three primary colors of the Lebanese flag. Additionally, the woman has red and white wings, and is surrounded by a flock of birds that are meant to symbolize freedom and the power of self-actualization. Finally, in what is perhaps the most prominent detail, the face of the woman is replaced by Lebanon's national emblem, the cedar tree. This tactical choice ties the entire piece together, highlighting the message that women are not only a symbol of strength, freedom, and resilience, but are also the representation of a nation longing to break free once and for all.

With an entire nation silenced and oppressed, subaltern women—the most marginalized of all social groups, due to factors



Figure 7. @ivan.debs, stand strong Lebanon part II. October 20, 2019.

such as gender, race, social class, and education—have the loudest voices, for they have the least to lose and the most to gain from the waves of change a successful revolution has to offer. It is during revolutions and periods of political crisis that women become the symbols of heroism that society did not know it needed.



Figure 9. Lebanese women protest on the Ring Bridge in central Beirut. MEE/Finbar Anderson.

Notes

¹ On October 20, 2019, after two weeks of nationwide protests demanding the removal of the government, then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned. Hassan Diab, a professor and ex-minister of education, was appointed by President Michel Aoun to serve as the new prime minister on December 19, 2019. See Hubbard and Saad (2019) and Wamsley (2019) for further information.

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