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Women's Untamed Voices Roar as They Lead the Lebanese Revolution

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As I gaze at the hordes of heads in front of me, waves of red and white, dotted with the green of the cedar, engulf the streets of Martyrs' Square. Protesters' laughter is laced with a hum of amusement, a testament to the sense of unity as they chant political slogans that only a month or so ago would have been all but unimaginable to hear on the streets of Lebanon. Standing on the front line, guiding and shielding thousands of protesters from the reels of barbed wire and the rows of riot police, are a multitude of diverse women, keeping the pulse of the Lebanese revolution beating.

The antigovernment protests that started on the night of October 17, 2019 quickly turned into a historic nationwide revolution. The movement has been criticized for its lack of leadership, but it has not been without effective guidance. At the front of the marches and educational lectures, organizing sit-ins and human barricades, are the women who have been an important motivating force behind the revolution. Encompassing different races, nationalities, ages, educational backgrounds, and careers, the diversity of the group of women leading the revolution is striking.

This article is less of an analysis, and more of my own understanding and appreciation of the many women—university students, professionals, mothers, activists, and others—who are leading the revolution. Talking to and documenting the stories of the women I write about has allowed me not only to witness the growth of the Lebanese revolution, but also to acknowledge

my own growth as a human being and Lebanese citizen. Before the revolution I thought, as did the majority of young people, that my future was waiting for me abroad, far away from Lebanon. But now, everything has changed. For the first time in Lebanon, people of different sects and classes have united to demand the removal of all political leaders. Who would have thought that anyone could walk around freely in downtown Beirut, chanting against sectarianism and the corrupt political elite? The revolution has been eye-opening, to say the least.

Annahar, a leading independent Lebanese political newspaper, took the initiative to show its gratitude and admiration for the women of the revolution by printing a unique issue of the paper that it rebranded *Naharouki* (yours) (Annahar, 2019). In another bold move, *Naharouki* changed the lyrics of the Lebanese national anthem by adding the word “women” to a sentence that has historically referred only to men:

All for the country, for the glory, for the flag
From the beginning of centuries, our pencil
and sword
Our field and mountains are making the
women and men
Our word and work on the way of perfection
All for the country, for the glory for the flag.
(Annahar, 2019, author translation)

“Women are an indispensable factor in the unfolding of events, for they have proven that they can provide the nation with the elements needed to go on with this revolution,” says Salma Yassine, a writer for the English column of *Annahar* who has been actively participating in the revolution. “They have been valiant enough to voice the nation’s cry, breaking stereotypes, and demanding rights that should have been granted a long time ago” (Yassine, personal communication, December 1, 2019, author translation).

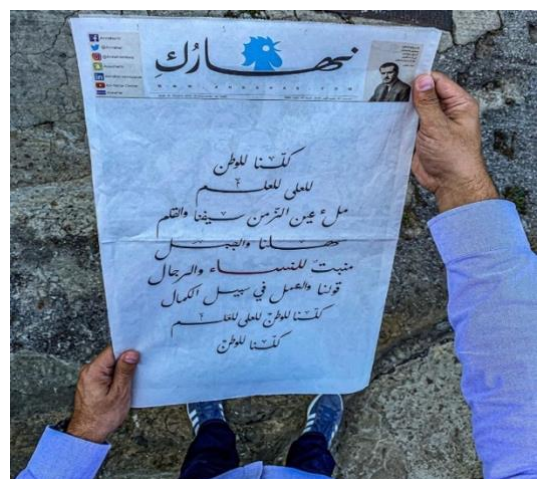


Figure 1. Annahar newspaper's Naharouki issue



Figure 2. Salma Yassine (right)

The first two nights of the revolution were notable for the violent clashes between security forces and protesters, which carried on long into the night. However, on the third evening, a crowd of women jumped in to form a human shield to separate the two sides. “The biggest contribution women made to the revolution was making it more peaceful, ensuring no civilian got harmed,” says Yasmine Kaissi, an activist who protested daily. “As soon as women took to the front lines, the clashes stopped immediately,” Kaissi continues. “When people saw that it was a peaceful protest, they felt more comfortable to join in, which is why we saw thousands of people from all over Lebanon participate in the demonstrations. I give all of the credit to women” (Kaissi, personal communication, November 30, 2019, my translation).



Figure 3. Yasmine Kaissi protesting in Martyrs' Square.

As the demonstrations escalated, security forces again resorted to physical violence in order to remove roadblocks set up by protesters around Beirut. Once again, women placed themselves on the front lines. They screamed, chanted, and even kicked at times, until the security forces backed off. A video of a young woman kicking a cabinet minister's armed bodyguard not only went viral, but quickly became the symbol of the revolution (Rose, 2020). “Lebanese women are breaking taboos to be face of protests” was the headline of an article by Sunniva Rose (2019) in *The National*, an English-language news outlet based in the United Arab Emirates.



Figure 4. Lebanon's “kick-queen.”
February 20, 2020.

The protests have been incomparable to anything that Lebanon has ever experienced, in more ways than one. The wide diversity of women on the ground surprised everyone. “As a queer woman, participating in the revolution is complicated, as many who are there may be opposed to your fight,” says Ghida Ladkani, a film and literature student at the Lebanese American University. “However, the revolution wouldn’t have been the same without the presence of queer women. We added class issues to the discourse, which is much needed in a protest that could have disenfranchised the lower class” (Ladkani, personal communication, December 1, 2019, author translation).



Figure 5. Ghida Ladkani.

The revolution is for all. It created a space for the rights of all people, not only Lebanese. Protesters have repeatedly described their demands as nothing more than their well-deserved basic rights as citizens. But for non-Lebanese women, such rights are even scarcer. “I endured seeing my own people die in a country that’s supposed to be their home. I don’t want that for Lebanon and Lebanese citizens,” says Tima Kanaan, a Palestinian student living in Beirut. “Just because I’m not going to personally benefit if the revolution succeeds in overthrowing the current regime, that doesn’t hinder me from fighting hand-in-hand with other women from the Arab world against injustice and corruption” (Kanaan, personal communication, December 3, 2019, author translation).



Figure 6. Tima Kanaan at Riyadh Al-Solh.

Lebanon’s legal system is overflowing with laws that perpetuate gender inequality, especially against women. Lebanese mothers cannot pass their citizenship on to their children. Problems arise when it comes to divorce, property rights, and child custody, due to the personal status laws. The country has one of the shortest maternity leave allowances

in the world. Legal protections against domestic violence are minimal, if they are enforced at all. And marital rape is still not criminalized.

Facing such legal and social oppressions has incentivized women to go out onto the streets. “I lived through the Civil War and all its misfortunes. I grew up in fear. I will not let my daughters grow up the same way, which is why I left everything to go protest with other Lebanese women as we scream out our pain, in the hope that it will be heard,” says 48 year-old divorced mother of two Raghida Darazi (Darazi, personal communication, December 4, 2019, author translation).

The women of the Lebanese revolution have been both its foundation and its support, quite literally holding it together. A system as old as Lebanon’s will not go down without a fight, but no matter whether the revolution succeeds or not, it has surely marked a great victory for all women.



Figure 7. Raghida Darazi (right) protesting with her family.

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