

# No Point to Discretion

Ramez Maluf

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Certainly, one of the most distressing things to anyone interested in the cause of women's liberation in Lebanon must be the general disarming popular apathy. To most Lebanese men, feminism is anathema or, at best, a subject of derision. For their part, the vast majority of Lebanese women are not interested in clearly defined feminist issues, and those few who are have not been able to vocalize their concerns so as to capture the public's imagination. Except in a few small circles, feminism as a social movement in Lebanon is as dead as a doornail.

It is difficult for anyone, and particularly for a man, to gauge the emotive consequence of the absence of a feminist movement helping women voice and define their concerns. While there are a number of people who have adopted the cause of feminism, the social discourse over the issues remains limited and uninspired. Newspapers allude to it only intermittently and the debate is obfuscated by religious and traditional discourse that, at best, suppresses real dialogue. The moment someone brings up feminism, a slew of

traditionalists or religious apologists jump to say that everything is honky-dory just as it is.

A major yardstick of the viability of any social movement is its ability to encourage discussion of relevant issues among those most affected by its concerns. The responsibility to arouse interest in the subject lies primarily with those directly concerned by the issues, who are able to present the case eloquently and encourage debate. In other words, the responsibility lies with liberated men and women -- and particularly with women.

It is their responsibility to raise the issues, galvanize public opinion and try to grip other men and women with their concerns. It is not uncommon for the early adepts of a movement to have, at first, to devote their time to trying to convince those close to them of the righteousness of their cause. Those who fought slavery had fellow slaves as their enemies, while, in many instances, those who opposed colonial powers had no easy task in convincing their own countrymen to rally to their side. Those interested in the cause of women in Lebanon must certainly

begin by convincing women close to them of the need for a social movement that addresses their concerns. Sadly, however, there are no signs that this is happening, and I can suggest five reasons why.

## One to Five

First, there is no unified understanding among those interested in the cause of women of what feminism represents, or what its main concerns should be. Feminism is a Western tradition, and most of the men and women who have been touched by it were first introduced to this phenomenon during a stay abroad, or while operating in a Western-oriented environment. But their experiences, and interpretation of those experiences were unequal, depending on their backgrounds, and the extent and intensity of their exposure. The manner with which they have adapted that accumulated experience to the Lebanese reality also vary. The apparently clearly defined issues of feminism in France, England or the United States, become murky and difficult to interpret in a different and complex world.

Second, in the Arab World in general, and in Lebanon in particular, the large political questions have not been answered, as they have in the countries where feminist movements are more developed. What has given feminism tremendous impetus, and considerable sway over the social life of such countries as the United States and France, is the ability of competent, socially-aware women to devote their careers to that cause. In countries such as Lebanon, riddled with social and political strife, and still partly occupied, overt and strident concern with feminist issues can be made to appear callous or irresponsible.

Third, religious attitudes are a major obstacle to the development of a serious dialogue. As practiced and preached in Lebanon, religion is oppressive to women, although this is truer of some faiths than others. Sensitivities in Lebanon are such that nothing that may appear to aggress religious belief receives wide circulation in the press. Since religious beliefs are intrinsically entangled with the culture that oppresses women, any debate about feminism from which religion is absent is meaningless.

Historically, the more vocal secular organizations, from which women could have expected support, such as the Communist party or the Syrian Nationalist Social party, have subsumed or used the issue for what they saw as a broader political question. In addition, these organizations have distanced themselves from concerns seen as too Western oriented, among them the feminist movement.

Fourth, social movements have no real history in the Arab world or in Lebanon. Therefore, there are no standing institutions, nor a national collective memory, that come to the assistance of the feminist movement in its hours of need.

Fifth, patriarchal relations are very strong in Lebanon, and many feminists, overwhelmed by them, attempt to compartmentalize their concerns too narrowly. The most common, and the most successful examples, are women who chose to focus on legal issues alone, isolating them from their general context. This approach is too circumscribed.

Daunted by the system, some feminists are too quick to point out that they are not putting all existing patriarchal relations into question -- as if some of them are worth preserving! Many seem to fear that they may be perceived by the public at large to be advocating feminism in some extreme fashion, and questioning all values, including sexual relations.

Indeed, why not? Women's liberation necessarily means that traditional sexual behavioral patterns must be questioned. There is no easy, eternally applicable code of sexual behavior and a society must be allowed to debate its beliefs and mores, on the assumption that honest and responsible men and women can and must discuss issues and be allowed to behave in accordance with their convictions.

### What Can Be Done

Those interested in the cause of feminism should begin a debate among themselves, through the press and small gatherings, to identify specific common concerns. Of course, some of this already happens. However, although many people have adopted the cause of feminism, few have sharpened their interest enough to the point where they have clearly identified their views. More debate would certainly help focus their concerns.

The idea that the cause of feminism should wait until the day the greater political issue is resolved is gobbledygook. The greater political

issues in Lebanon, not to speak of the Arab World, may take generations to resolve, and to be asked to postpone dealing with the oppression of women until that day when all is well is tantamount to shelving the matter indefinitely. Moreover, feminism should be part and parcel of the political struggle, not a sidebar to it. Feminists must interest themselves in the overall political questions and, in turn, insist that their concerns be made a part of the larger debate.

Finally, feminists in Lebanon should stop kowtowing to religious and patriarchal attitudes. Too much time and effort has been wasted portraying feminism as compatible with prevalent religious attitudes or beliefs. Feminist debate should be free and rational and not adaptable to preconceived notions. Those who prefer to define their beliefs through the prism of tradition or religion must be respected, but let be. There is no point in talking to them. Feminists should learn how to operate in a religious environment, but should not confuse this responsibility with acquiescence to religious attitudes.

The war that ravaged Lebanon for 16 years forced the Lebanese to re-question many of their traditional values, and the country today is in the midst of redefining its identity. Although there are many different cultural clusters in Lebanon, some more open to new ideas than others, a large number of the Lebanese are ready to accept, if not participate in, social debate. Now is the time for those with strong and righteous beliefs to speak their minds as clearly and as eloquently as possible. In an environment so overwhelmingly patriarchal, feminists cannot hope to make a dent by overzealous discretion.

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