

The Erasure of Women from Lebanese History

Maryam Chamseddine
English Major

Women’s centrality to the nation and state formation, their absence from written history, the inappropriateness of conventional research methods for discovering women “in history”—all these have been the focus of recent feminist theory.

(Sayigh, 1998, p. 42)

Introduction

History is largely retold from the perspective of men. This has led to the erasure and absence of women from history books, and consequently, the invisibility of the many injustices that women have faced and continue to suffer from (Sharaf Eddine, 2022; Shuayb & al-Sarraf, 2022). Arguably, the absence of women in history has prevented us from achieving gender equality globally. Lebanon is no different. In the case of Lebanese history, there is still no unified history textbook taught in schools, which has left various critical events—such as the civil war, Israeli invasions and attacks, and the various massacres of men, women, and children, among others—completely out of certain curricula. The lack of a unified historical textbook for schools has also made it more difficult to redress women’s overall absence from history.

Nayla Hamadeh, Ex-President of the Lebanese Association for History (LAH), discusses the dangers of restricting history to the point of view of men only (Sharaf Eddine, 2022). She criticizes the approach commonly used to teach history in Lebanon, which frequently asks students to simply memorize facts rather than critically engage with historical events or issues. For this reason, she notes, students only end up memorizing the hegemonic version of history. This version often ignores the voices of marginalized

groups, including but not limited to women. This has several critical consequences. To start, it reinforces normative gender roles: Overlooking women's role as important historical figures has meant that women are primarily featured as "unimportant" housewives and caretakers. Further, such a gender-biased history that only focuses on men paints women as passive, invisible individuals in society as opposed to their male counterparts who are portrayed as active agents. Given the important role of education in shaping the perceptions of youth, it is critical to challenge this normative history to prevent the perpetuation of sexism and the creation of yet another generation that fails to address women's issues and see the world through a gender lens.

It is paramount that history is retold from women's perspectives. As well, history should be taught using materials produced by women, including textbooks written by women history scholars. Learning about history from a woman's point of view can powerfully shape our perception of the world that extends beyond the restricted and limited version of history that continues to be taught in schools in Lebanon. This is because if society starts looking at things from different viewpoints, such as that of women, people will begin to understand issues of gender inequality and discrimination because they are seeing and learning about it firsthand. Women as tellers of history can provide a different perspective, one that opens people's eyes to a different set of structural challenges they might not have noticed before. Including women as both the subjects of history curricula as well as the authors of history will therefore encourage the adoption of a gender lens. The stories of women historical figures can help students to more easily identify gender inequality, including how gender has been weaponized historically and the various women's movements that have emerged to try and fight back against this inequality. Producing this type of critical thinking is key to creating strong gender equitable policies in the future and can contribute to a more gender equitable society overall.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the problem of women's marginalization in Lebanese history. In particular, the paper advocates for the inclusion of women in history in two ways: women as subjects of history in school curricula, and women as writers of history. Including women as subjects of history means that students will be required to learn about various women historical figures as part of their history courses. Including women as writers of history means that women historians, writers, and scholars should have a place in educational curricula, such as in history courses, to bring a wide array of perspectives to the course material and ultimately, to the students.

To delve into this issue, the methodology that is used includes a content analysis of research studies conducted on women's exclusion from history curricula and materials with the aim to determine the causes and effects of this exclusion. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and solutions that could be implemented to redress this exclusion.

Women's Roles in Lebanese History

Lebanese history is full of women leaders and writers who took part in social and political life, many of whom participated in the early stages of the feminist movement in the country. However, these women's voices have not been recognized and given

the attention they deserve. Lebanese people fail to see that women have had essential roles in shaping the community since World War I because of their absence in history books and the marginalization of their voices. The activities of women before and during World War I are a powerful example of the ways that women's work has been overlooked by mainstream Lebanese history books. In 1914, a group of women founded the "Awakening of the Young Arab Women Association," whose purpose was to empower Arab females through education. The group consisted of women activists who fought and challenged a patriarchal system, including well-known feminists like Anbara Salam, Ibtihaj Qaddura, Amina Hamzawi, Adila Bayhum, and others (Hivos, n.d.).

During World War I, women played a crucial role founding clubs and charity organizations, which created an opening for them to enter the political arena and to possess some political power (Cochran et al., 2010). Women leaders advocated for independence from the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon, and demanded equal educational rights for men and women. Cochran et al. (2010) state that the Women's Union in Syria and Lebanon was established in 1924 to support women's rights including issues such as child custody, divorce, and education rights. Throughout the years of World War I and the French Mandate, women maintained their power and reached higher positions in society, even participating in and leading protests against the Mandate. However, the dominance of men and the use of violence against women was prevalent, which pushed many women out of the public sphere.

Leila Saad and Emily Nasrallah are among the inspirational women whose roles made a huge difference in Lebanese society during World War I. Leila Saad was able to establish schools, including language schools, for girls in Choueifat, Lebanon. One of these schools, the Charles Saad School, remains open today. Moreover, Saad and her husband opened schools in many countries around the world, shaping the future of women's and men's education in Lebanon and beyond, but her work is not fully acknowledged in Lebanese history books. Emily Nasrallah was among the graduates of the Charles Saad school and one of the few women who first went to college, a sign of Saad's success. Nasrallah became a writer who went on to win many awards, and in her stories, she addresses important topics about gender equality and the barriers Lebanese women face. However, Nasrallah is rarely included in Arab women's literary anthologies (Cochran et al., 2010). Other influential female figures include Mary 'Ajamy, Mary Yanni, Julie Dimashaqiyya, Nazik 'Abid, Adila Bayhum, and Nazira Zayd al-Din, as noted by Sharma (2012). These women all took part in advancing the role of women and securing a better future for women under the French Mandate. Struggling from the oppression of the French Mandate that discriminated against women, these leaders were always determined to make a change through protesting, demanding their education rights, and breaking from the domestic sphere. Women stood beside men during these hard times, and they never neglected the issue of women's rights, making it a priority along with nationalist goals. "Women were not passive—they were active, practical, powerful, and resourceful" (Sharma, 2012, p. 67).

The efforts of these women would continue after the French Mandate, beyond World War II and through the early years of Lebanon's independence. They would continue to fight against the "new" patriarchal system that replaced the French Mandate, and

they would fight against growing sectarian divisions. Thus, Lebanese and Syrian women leaders, advocates, and writers, among others, have left a salient mark in history, challenging dominant gender norms at the time.

The Marginalization of Women in Lebanese History

In a study conducted by The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) and UNESCO, 428 Lebanese textbooks were examined to assess the different portrayals of men and women. The results of the study indicated that women were underrepresented, and the depiction of women often aligned with the stereotypical role of women as “weak, dependent, and emotional,” whereas men were shown to be strong, independent, and patriotic leaders (USAID, 2021, p. 10). Shuayb and al-Sarraf’s (2022) study also demonstrated the erasure of women from Lebanese history, and noted that if women were present, they were linked to stereotypical roles such as wives and mothers. The presence of women historically as either mothers or wives frequently resulted in the production of a historical subject who lacked agency and was considered an insignificant part of society. Relatedly, Sharaf Eddine (2022) discusses the results of a social experiment that was conducted to assess awareness about women’s roles in the Lebanese Civil War. When asked to discuss what they knew about the war, replies were mainly: “men with guns, men shooting, men making peace” (para. 1). In other words, women were not conceptualized as having played a critical role, or any role at all in the Lebanese Civil War. This study therefore demonstrates how the retelling of Lebanese history primarily from the male gaze has invisibilized women, who have been belittled and undermined as historical agents in their own right.

The issue of marginalizing women in history is also tied to the ways that the dominant religions in the region, such as Islam and Christianity, teach about their own histories. Aslan (2013) discusses this problem in relation to Islam and explains how the erasure of women from religious discourse is done intentionally “in order to theologially legitimize gender roles that favored men and required women’s submission” (p. 38). In contrast, Aslan (2013) sheds light on how women in Islam were strong leaders who partook in wars and led troops, even though their roles are often ignored in the context of Islamic history. The author attributes this to men’s misogyny and their misinterpretations of Qur’anic verses that address women. Aslan (2013) explains how such allegations do not even have a Qur’anic scriptural basis but instead, are tied to what he describes as “poorly authentic” hadiths: “Such hadiths, attributed to the Prophet, neither correspond to the Prophet’s way of life nor historical accounts, and furthermore they are not compatible with the context of early Islam” (p. 42).

Relatedly, David Kelly, a Welsh scientist, explains how discrimination in education about history could be used as a political tool to maintain power dynamics, as reported by Lattouf (1999). Lattouf further argues that educational curricula are often designed in a way that aligns with society’s dominant ideology, which is the case in Lebanon. In the case of Lebanon, it can be argued that the portrayal of women in stereotypical gender roles is necessary to maintain a patriarchal society that is in favor of men: Any action that might challenge this hierarchy, such as the inclusion of women in history, is considered as a threat (Lattouf, 1999). Educational materials, or what is being taught, is therefore subject to strict oversight by those in power to ensure that challenges to the current patriarchal system are eradicated. Thus, education can be, and often is a

major tool that prevents equality and reinforces sexism. In removing women from the historical record and preventing their voices from being heard, education curricula can effectively maintain and perpetuate the violent patriarchal system. Knowing this, it becomes clear that historical portrayals of women as passive agents are not necessarily true, but might be largely attributed to the heteronormativity of the education system and the role it plays in maintaining the patriarchal order.

To add, Cochran et al. (2010) suggest that women's marginalization in historical accounts lies in the social constitution of a sexist society that does not give women equal opportunities. When asked about why they think they are not acknowledged in history, women claimed that the legislative system and the societal norms are built by men who wish to maintain their power. Moreover, women have limited opportunities in education and employment in the first place which makes it harder to make their voices heard and their achievements recognized (Cochran et al., 2010).

In their study, Bahous et al. (2013) shed light on how Frédéric Laffon and Khalil Joreige, two filmmakers who produced films about Lebanon's Civil War, were initially shocked to learn about the huge gaps in teaching Lebanese history. In response to this, they wanted to give voice to the forgotten stories and voices of the war. Through this work, they highlighted that these gaps in Lebanese history can be attributed to the complex political and sectarian environment in Lebanon after the conclusion of the war, which prevented attempts to develop a new history curriculum. As a result of these complexities, Sharaf Eddine (2022) explains that the history curriculum, which was established during the 1960s, has never been updated or changed. Sharaf Eddine (2022) also remarks how there is a lack of female writers who produce history books.

Consequently, even if schools choose different books from different publishing houses, a common problem remains: Without women writers, these books will continue to overlook their perspectives. Therefore, including women as historical actors in history books and curricula should also be accompanied by a simultaneous effort to include the works of women writers, historians, scholars, and others, on history.

Rewriting History

The marginalization of women's history—their role as historical actors and as writers of history—is a barrier to the development of critical thinking skills. It is also a barrier to the adoption of gender equitable attitudes and beliefs. To address this, Hamadeh (Sharaf Eddine, 2022) stresses the importance of oral history and how it could be incorporated within the curriculum to produce a well-rounded perspective of the past that includes women. This could help to emphasize the voice of women and their struggles throughout history (Sharaf Eddine, 2022). "Rewriting is impossible without retelling, which shows the need for the use of oral history, which only emerged in the 1950s," states Hamadeh, as quoted by Sharaf Eddine (2022, para. 15). Rosemary Sayigh's (1998) work with Palestinian women in Lebanon is a powerful example of this kind of historical retelling using oral histories.

Sayigh's (1998) work documents the stories of Palestinian women in Lebanon so that they are heard and brought to life. Sayigh conveys how there is no acknowledgement of Arab and Muslim women's stories about local history. This issue was brought to

Sayigh's attention when she asked a teacher in Burj al Barajneh camp to suggest possible people that could talk about their experience of being Palestinians, and the first 20 potential speakers did not include one woman. Like what Hamadeh suggested, Sayigh (1998) recognizes the importance of oral retelling of history to provide personalized insights into marginalized communities and to examine the details that may have been overlooked, all while preserving a cultural and social sense of the story. This methodology is what Sayigh calls a "real" retelling of history. The absence of an official record of Palestinian history in Lebanon has led to an erasure of Palestinian people and their stories, many of which have been forgotten by mainstream historical accounts of Lebanon, even though Palestinians have always been a part of Lebanese history. "Their omission would leave us with an impoverished history unable to explain how, in spite of everything, the Palestinian people's struggle has persisted" (Sayigh, 1998, p. 57). Hamadeh adds how oral retelling of history does not privilege one party over the other, but gives voice to the "heroes, the armed, and the defenseless" (Sharaf Eddine, 2022).

Previous Policies, Laws, and Regulations in Lebanon

Many attempts to renew the history curriculum in Lebanon have failed. Sharaf Eddine (2022) explains that several committees were formed to implement changes to the curriculum but to no avail. The government does not have any intentions to renew the curriculum, especially because history is merely seen as a subject to be memorized to obtain high grades, instead of an interactive topic that students can critically engage with. Lebanon's educational system has, however, witnessed several attempts at reform, although the implementation of these reforms has not been consistent. For instance, a 1994 reform aimed to promote social cohesion and the unification of textbooks but has not yet been implemented. Shuayb (2016) explains how the 1994 and the 2010 reforms still did not address the representation of socially marginalized groups. Additionally, the policies implemented did not seek to decrease the gaps between the private and public sectors of education. Carrascal (2021) points out that the implementation of these reforms was not achieved because of a lack of enforcement. For instance, there was no guaranteeing that teachers adopted the new changes of the curriculum. Moreover, the civil war period was still not taught in history textbooks. In addition, there was the National Action Plan for All in 2005 which aimed to improve the quality and relevance of education, increase access to education for disadvantaged and marginalized groups, and promote gender equality and inclusive education. However, as Shuayb (2018) noted, there was considerable ambiguity in the strategy plan with no clear strategy for implementation. The strategy also contained several implementation gaps, evidence that the stakeholders did not take its implementation seriously.

Other attempts at reform include The People's Rights Movement (PRM) which was established in 1986 to increase awareness about "nonviolence, non-authoritarianism, and tolerance for gender, sect, and class in Lebanese schools" (Abu-Saba, 1999, p. 43). The leaders were then appointed to implement a curriculum titled "Humanistic Education" that fostered the aforementioned issues. Despite this, it seems that there is still no evidence for any modifications or changes in the Lebanese curriculum that shed light on women, resulting in a lack of awareness about women's roles in history. According to USAID (2021), the National Education Strategy has no clear indication for gender equality, which leaves instructors uninformed about how to implement any material related to gender equality. Based on their research, teachers are not trained

on how to develop gender inclusive teaching material (USAID, 2021). USAID (2021) recommended several policies to solve this issue such as developing curricula that are more gender inclusive and prohibit gender stereotypes and patriarchal views, and training teachers to approach education through a gender lens.

Carrascal (2021) reports that several academics and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Lebanese Association for History, have sought change by approaching individual professionals in schools across the country about the need for educational reforms. Carrascal (2021) mentions how local and international agencies could support these efforts by providing trainings for teachers to learn how to address sensitive topics such as the civil war. Another research study by Shuayb (2018) identifies the role of research centers in shaping education in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese Association for Education Studies (LAES) among others. Interestingly, Shuayb (2018) points out that some government stakeholders prefer to work with contracted individuals rather than with organizations that specialize in historical education. Ultimately, this reveals a lack of political will toward educational reforms and the desire to keep things the way they currently are.

Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis, there are several policy recommendations that can address the problem of women's marginalization in history books as well as the marginalization of gender issues in history curricula.

For the Lebanese government and governmental educational institutions:
As previous educational reforms and educational strategies have been vague about the inclusion of women's roles in history, a new plan is needed. Moreover, before implementing a new strategy, the issue of a unified history book must be resolved.

Drawing on this, several recommendations include:

- Reach a consensus on a unified history that fills the gaps in history textbooks and includes the period of the civil war and other contentious events, such as the attacks of Israel from 1948 until the Israeli invasion of Lebanon during 1982 and later, the 2006 war, among others. These sensitive periods should be approached as objectively as possible, which can be done by highlighting the roles of diverse groups and actors during these periods, including women, and honoring the victims of the many massacres that have taken place. This history should be inclusive of Syrians, Palestinians, and other non-Lebanese communities, as they are also active participants in Lebanese history.
- Develop a new educational strategy to address the current gaps in the Lebanese educational curriculum, with an emphasis on eliminating gender bias and highlighting women's historical roles.
- Ensure that any future educational strategies and reforms are enforced and implemented.
- As noted by Shuayb (2018), policymakers in education could reach out to research centers such as the LAES to work efficiently and to effect faster changes relative to curriculum changes.
- As previous research has shown, it is necessary to increase funds and invest in public schools to improve the quality of education. Additionally, public school

teachers should receive proper training on how to address topics from a gender lens and be more inclusive.

For NGOs:

- Raise awareness about women's roles in history and the importance of their leadership. This could be done through several creative and informative initiatives such as workshops and seminars, and developing campaigns to spread this message through digital and traditional media channels.
- Empower women to write history. If not through writing, women can retell their stories and talk about women's activities during critical historical moments.

For publishing houses:

- Increase publishing resources dedicated to women historians and writers.
- Raise awareness about existing historical books written by women.

For religious institutions:

- Recognize and acknowledge the contributions of women to religious tradition and history. This can be done by including the stories and perspectives of women in religious texts and teachings, and by celebrating the achievements and contributions of women in religious communities.
- Challenge and reject patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and traditions that reinforce gender inequality and discrimination. This can be done by engaging in critical and inclusive discussions of religious texts and practices, and by promoting alternative interpretations and practices that are more inclusive and empowering for women.
- Support and collaborate with organizations and initiatives that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. This can involve providing financial and organizational support to organizations that work on issues such as women's education, health, and political participation, and by participating in coalitions and advocacy campaigns that aim to advance gender equality.
- Engage in dialogue and partnerships with other religious institutions and communities that share a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. This can involve participating in interfaith initiatives and conferences and engaging in dialogue and cooperation with other religious institutions and leaders on issues related to women's rights and equality.

For educational institutions:

- Promote research and scholarship on women's history. This could provide a platform for scholars, researchers, and educators to share their findings and expertise on women's history in the country and help to raise awareness of the contributions and experiences of women in Lebanese history.
- Provide support and resources for the teaching of history in schools, including funding for teacher training and the development of new teaching materials. This could include initiatives such as teacher workshops, teacher networks, and the development of online resources and tools for history teachers, as well as other courses, to adopt a more gender inclusive approach to the material.
- Develop a gender-sensitive and inclusive history curriculum that reflects the country's diverse cultural and political heritage.

Conclusion

To conclude, the lack of depiction of women in history and the marginalization of their voices contributes to gender inequality in society. When it comes to textbooks and educational curricula, specifically history textbooks, women are presented as passive agents, in line with stereotypical gender roles. This stereotypical image of women, and the absence of women from history, reinforces gender inequality, especially in young generations. For centuries, history has been told from the point of view of men, the winners, and the privileged. Meanwhile, socially marginalized groups do not get the chance to make their voices heard. Learning about the history of women is crucial to understanding gender discrimination.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Saba, M.B.** (1999). Human needs and women peacebuilding in Lebanon. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5(1), 37–57. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1207/s15327949pac0501_5
- Aslan, E.** (2013). Early community politics and the marginalization of women in Islamic intellectual history. In E. Aslan, M. Hermansen, & E. Medeni (Eds.), *Muslima theology: The voices of Muslim women theologians* (pp. 33-45). Peter Lang AG. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4f10.5>
- Bahous, R., Nabhani, M., & Rabo, A.** (2013). Parochial education in a global world? Teaching history and civics in Lebanon. *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 13(1), 57–79. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/nordidactica/article/view/18943>
- Carrascal, I.H.** (2021). *Lebanon's education system: Why reforms are necessary*. Friedrich Naumann Stiftung. <https://www.freiheit.org/lebanon/lebanons-education-system-why-reforms-are-necessary>
- Cochran, J., Nabhani, M., Bahous, R., & Zeinati, R.** (2010, October 13). *Leadership in the Middle East: The story of women in Lebanon*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/leadership-middle-east-story-women-lebanon>
- Hivos.** (n.d.) *The history of the Women's Movement in Lebanon*. <https://www.womenshistoryinlebanon.org/>
- Lattouf, M.** (1999). *The history of women's higher education in modern Lebanon and its social implications* [Doctoral thesis, The University of Arizona]. University of Arizona. <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/288958>
- Sayigh, R.** (1998). Palestinian camp women as tellers of history. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 27(2), 42–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538283>
- Sharaf Eddine, N.** (2022, January 3). *Lebanon: Marginalizing the role of women in history and education*. Daraj. <https://daraj.com/en/85326/>
- Sharma, I.** (2012). *Leaving her footprint: Women's struggle for power in French Syria & Lebanon 1920-1936* [Bachelor's Honors thesis, Rutgers University]. Rutgers University. <https://history.rutgers.edu/docman-docs/undergraduate/honors-papers-2012/409-leaving-her-footprint-women-struggle-for-power-in-french-syria-lebanon-1920-1936/file>
- Shuayb, M.** (2016). Education for social cohesion attempts in Lebanon: reflections on the 1994 and 2010 education reforms. *Education as Change*, 20(3), 225–242. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2016/1531>
- Shuayb, M.** (2018). Who shapes education reform policies in Lebanon? *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(4), 548–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1434409>
- Shuayb, M., & al-Sarraf, D.** (2022). The portrayal of women in history curricula and textbooks in Lebanon: A history of systematic exclusion. *Citizenship Teaching & Learning*, 17(3), 437–453. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1386/ctl_00102_1
- USAID.** (2021). *Gender analysis of basic public education in Lebanon*. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XVS5.pdf