

Are Sexual Dissidence and Gender Activism Necessarily Linked? Notes from the field on the body

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Abstract

This paper seeks to show the links between sexual dissidence and gender activism in the context of post-war Lebanon. It reviews the framework of feminists' work on embodiment in an attempt to situate the lived experience of women and similarly less privileged gendered categories in relation to gender activism. With feminist theorists opting for the lived experience instead of the mind/body binary, to what extent can we speak of the relevance of the lived experience in the context of gender activism in post-war Lebanon? In less abstract terms, this paper asks, can we speak of gender activism when the body is reiterated in sexed terms, rather than gendered ones?

Keywords: Gender Activism, Sexuality, Sex, Dissidence, Political Apathy

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The relevance of the body to gender activism in post-war Lebanon was the focus of recent empirical work I conducted. The body, in addition to encompassing the notions of desire, expression, and self-understanding is also a site of contestation that calls for an analysis that looks beyond taboos, and accounts for power, control, and regulation. The empirical work took into account questions such as, what does it mean to view sexuality as regulation and control, or how does sexuality helps us identify sites of agency and transgression? The data collected reflect not one, but several complex realities where the body becomes the tool through which gendered bodies challenge gender hierarchy in Lebanon.

This paper seeks to show the links between sexual dissidence and gender activism in the context of post-war Lebanon. It reviews the framework of feminists' work on embodiment in an attempt to situate the lived experience of women and similarly less privileged gendered categories in relation to gender activism. With feminist theorists opting for the lived experience instead of the mind/body binary, to what extent can we speak of the relevance of the lived experience in the context of gender activism in post-war Lebanon? In less abstract terms, this paper asks, can we speak of gender activism when the body is reiterated in sexed terms, rather than gendered ones?

This question is important at a time when gender activism in post-war Lebanon prioritizes women's political rights, such as ending gender-based violence and honor crimes, or the right of women to pass

their citizenship to their children – often neglecting equally important questions related to the body, including sexuality, desire, pleasure, or ownership of one's body. The gap between achieving political rights and the lived experience of gendered bodies – who often carry the burden of being the “representative of the culturally authentic” – is problematic because it entails questions related to self-expression in both instances. Moreover, this gap is often lost when we consider the way in which Lebanon is often “celebrated” for its liberal views on sexuality - often to dire consequences as I show later.

Methodology

How to explain this gap constituted the main preoccupation of a fieldwork conducted in the cities of Beirut and Tripoli during the year 2014. The fieldwork combined a number of qualitative methods, mainly interviews and participant-observation. 42 men and women were interviewed in total. Their age ranged between 20 and 40 years old. Most lived in an urban setting, and came from middle and lower middle class backgrounds, and with the exception of 4 women, all had pursued their education upon graduating from high school. The age range of the interviewees is important because it is representative of Lebanon's post-civil war generation. The choice of the cities is deliberate. Beirut, often reiterated in clichéd terms as an “enlightened” city, is a reliable space for accessing Lebanon's major sectarian communities, as seen in the array of sociological investigations carried in it. Tripoli, on the other hand, is often represented in Lebanon's media in static and reductionist ways. This representation reiterates the city as “too Sunni” and focuses almost exclusively on the sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Alawites, recently exacerbated by the war in Syria.¹ It was important for me to challenge this monolithic representation and include Tripoli in her research. It remains to say that the findings recollected hereafter are the results of the many tensions encountered during the fieldwork between the different interpretations of the body, and that the paper is a side project of a larger thesis.

This paper first defines the notion of “dissident bodies” and “sexual dissidence” through the framework of feminists' accounts on embodiment. It posits “sexual dissidence” as an embodied social knowledge that encompasses notions of self-expression, desire, and intimacy, and where men and women reclaim their body from the limitations previously imposed on it by patriarchal impediments. The paper then examines the “question of the body” in relation to gender activism in Lebanon. Despite the centrality of the body to both dissident bodies and gender activism, gender activism in Lebanon is perceived as fractured, from an embodiment lens, since political demands and sexual expression are seen, to a large extent, as disconnected. This point is developed through extracts from the interviews. The paper concludes by arguing that dissident bodies are an expected manifestation of post-war Lebanon where modernity is rushed, national reconciliation abandoned, and self-made values are replacing the repetitive failures of the State, and by expansion the Law – both in the legal and the social sense. An exploration of a number of “moral panics”, in addition to a visual analysis are provided in support of this statement. However, the self-made safe spaces, or bubbles, remain intact as long as their choices remain beyond the grasp of official frames.

On a side note, this paper uses the category of women, men, lesbians, gays, or queers as an abstraction, following the work of Lena Gunnarsson. For Gunnarsson, both intersectional and de-constructivist claims “essentialize women”, and by extension men, in “meta-theoretical assumption.”² Consequently, this paper follows her recommendation and embraces gendered social categories as an

abstraction since "a common basis for experience translates into a common basis for struggle."³ For instance, despite the fact that women in Lebanon experience asymmetrically different gender structures, no amount of intersectional scrutiny, no matter the extent to which it upholds the woman component they share, can result in a sisterhood. However, such is the internal coherence of Lebanon's multiple gender structures so as men and women can be thought of as one category. Still, such abstraction remains off limit to the material conditions that greatly shape the lives of the men and women within each of the categories.

Dissident Bodies: On Embodiment and the Lived Experience

The universal interpretation of male superiority finds its roots in the essential difference between the female and male sexes. The difference between the male and the female body results in an endless array of binaries where the female and the male are respectively associated with the natural and the cultural, the irrational and the rational, and most importantly, with the body and the mind. Feminist theorists have long challenged the mind-body split, opting instead to view the body as embodiment, or as lived experience.

Sherry Ortner draws on the natural/cultural divide to show how women have been cast off from the predominantly male cultural project, that which relates to the sciences and the creation of knowledge, in addition to being constructed as a lower sex.⁴ Simone de Beauvoir argues that women live their lives as an objectified body internalizing the male gaze, and consequently produce their bodies as objects for others.⁵ Beauvoir's famous words, that "one is that not born, but rather becomes a woman"⁶ constitutes the foundation of feminist perspectives on embodiment.

The concept of embodiment, or the lived experience, is a useful tool to examine the emergence of social discourses in a precise power structure. The challenge faced by feminist scholars is to explore the links, often tense ones, between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body. That is, the female body often becomes the site on which the "cultural" is expected to be performed. Such expectation results in essentialist views that rid women and men of any agency and reproduce culture in a fixed way.

For instance, and where gender is involved, Lebanon's local system of patriarchal connectivity privileges the males and the elders. However, an analysis that does not recognize the active participation of both men and women in the reproduction of said system is one that is lacking since it does not recognize personal agency. If anything, it overemphasizes the privileging of certain knowledges (male dominion) over others. Such an analysis is one that is complicit in the reproduction of Orientalist accounts that relate to the myth of virginity, to the binary of honour and shame, or to the victimization of women in general.

In this paper, sexual dissidence is used as a type of social knowledge promoted and embodied by those individuals to whom I refer as "dissident bodies", and where knowledge follows a Foucauldian interpretation. For Michel Foucault, mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge, and the gathered knowledge, in its turn, reinforces power. In Lebanon, social discourses emerge along local mechanisms of power, around which social bodies organize, make decision, resist or consent. However, these discourses are not absolute since class, gender, race, and location, among other

factors, influence to a great extent how one finds him/herself situated vis-à-vis them.

Sexual dissidence is one of many social discourses that pertain to the moral, national, and religious rubrics around which members of the society organize their life. Similarly to further gendered practices, sexual dissidence cannot be examined in Lebanon without examining the moral, national, and religious rubrics that accompany it. For instance, in this paper, among the interviewed dissident bodies who embody sexual dissidence are a young woman who has been cut off from her family when she decided to stay abroad and pursue her career rather than return to Lebanon and be married by the end of her studies, and a young woman who was the first in her extended family to pursue higher education. Although no sex narratives can be found in either of them, the very fact that both women engaged their bodies in spaces previously "forbidden" to them makes them sexually dissident. In this case, sexual dissidence is both knowledge and action that overrides their female biological sex. Their actions are seen as sexually dissident because they challenge the very basis of their corporeality: that of a sexed female body originally pre-destined for a fixed gender behavior. That said, sexual dissidence in this paper is not limited to biological mechanisms related to sexual practices if we were to consider the body in feminist terms of embodiment. It is a knowledge that is learnt and deployed by dissident bodies in an intimate exercise where sex is no longer restricted to a private or procreative space.⁷ Sexual dissidence is dissident not because it opposes a hetero-normative order; rather, it is dissident because it follows a knowledge that is radically feminist, which allows dissident bodies to rediscover their body and re-write its limits.

Following a feminist reading of the social, women's bodies in Lebanon can be seen as the site on which the "social" is necessarily inscribed. Sexual dissidence, defined in a nutshell as an action that defies taboos, could be seen as the ultimate act against precise social discourses that limit women's relationships with their bodies. Women's relationship with their bodies is often interrupted by patriarchally-upheld moral, religious, and national rubrics. In a study prepared by Rafif Sidawi⁸ on the changing meaning of honour and shame in Lebanon, she found that women in Lebanon are becoming increasingly capable of reclaiming their bodies from previously male-dominated places such as work and education. However, when it comes to spaces of intimacy, desire, and sex, women still find themselves under the scrutiny of the elders and the males of their surrounding. Sidawi's work concluded that women in Lebanon experience their sexuality in three different environments: conservative, liberal conservative, and radical ones. This paper follows in the footsteps of Sidawi's work. Sidawi was able to move beyond the age-old binary honour and shame. Her work invites us to view dissident sexualities as a spectrum of gendered behavior where both men and women co-construct the limits of what is considered acceptable or not.

When people transgress the social rubric in Lebanon, we talk of *'ayb*. In the case of dissident bodies, their dissidence is perceived following a spectrum of rebuttal. Their actions range from shameful to utterly unacceptable. In the latter, they are likely to have transgressed religious rubrics, in which case their actions are labelled *?aram*, which is the theologically applied expression to refer to what is not acceptable.

Both *'ayb* and *?aram* are invoked in gendered ways. As Lara Deeb and Mona Harb argue:

"There is another dimension to the concept that specifically refers to gendered behavior that is

considered shameful either because it marks women as sexually available or “loose” [faltaneh], or because it marks men as incapable. Here ‘ayb includes acts like a woman kissing her boyfriend in public, women smoking in public, and a man borrowing money from a woman.”⁹

Still, some gendered behaviors considered ‘ayb such as a woman smoking in public, are not considered as such if the woman in question is surrounded by some male kin. This is because it is understood that the male relatives of the woman accept her behavior and the woman is thus spared immediate commentaries.

Dissident bodies, then, challenge socially constructed moralities to varying consequences. Whereas certain dissident sexualities are less likely to result in extreme responses, such as reporting a sexual aggressor or alienating oneself from his/her immediate kin, other actions, such as cohabitation without marriage, or publicly “coming out” are more likely to contribute to serious rebuttals, including the risk of being arrested. Such narratives are becoming increasingly mainstream and are adding - in a most irresponsible manner, seeing the challenges and obstacles faced by dissident bodies - to the myth of sexual tolerance of Lebanon. It is not surprising, then, that many of the dissident bodies interviewed showed little interest in promoting their sexuality beyond the frames of the “societal bubbles” where they find mutual moralistic and religious values in their immediate surrounding.

Whereas some might question my use of the notion of dissidence in this case, it remains a deliberate choice in that it encompasses elements of both protest and transgression, and at times activism, often deployed in opposition to a socio-political status-quo. In order to justify her choice in the use of the notion of dissidence, I emphasise the centrality of the body or of the embodied resistance aspect of dissident bodies. Dissident bodies do, at times, reiterate normative constructs of gender. However, the very fact that they are restructuring their own relationship to their bodies, albeit in a structured system, is cause enough to recognise new meanings for desire, sexual experimentation, and self-expression in Lebanon. In order to clarify this point, I turn to the examples of Nancy and Marwa.

Nancy (a pseudonym taken after her favourite singer, Nancy Ajram) is a 21 years old Graphic Design student from Notre-Dame University. Nancy is sexually active with her boyfriend, and they often spend the weekends at each other’s place. Her social circle and immediate family know of her lifestyle.

Although Nancy is in a premarital relationship, and despite the fact that she is in a heterosexual monogamous relationship, a hetero-normative relationship by all accounts, she embodies her sexuality in non-conventional ways:

“I want to be able to kiss my boyfriend when I feel like it. I’m sick and tired of playing it safe. Do you know how much money I spend at those “cool” [usually upscale] cafés where it is OK for couples to kiss and cuddle? They cost me a fortune! And they’re so far from where my boyfriend and I live... And just so you know [aggressively], I believe that a woman is free to make her own choices when it comes to her body and her love life.”¹⁰

The example of Nancy is easily contrasted with the example of Marwa (borrowed name), a 19 years old student at the Institut Technique Industriel Superieur. After dating her boyfriend for a year and a half, Marwa decided to have sex with him “out of peer persuasion”:

"I never thought I'd be one of those girls who'd have sex before marriage. I've always been girly and playful [*dalloo'a*] with my boyfriend, but never thought I'd have sex with him. My mom would kill me if she knew! But after all the gossiping about sex with my girlfriends, I saw no harm in doing it."¹¹

Marwa was still dating her boyfriend at the time of the interview and is growing increasingly worried of becoming pregnant since her boyfriend refuses to use condoms. When I asked her why she wouldn't confront him about it, she replied: "I can't... not anymore... I feel I have to give in to everything he says because I worry so much that he is going to tell everyone about me."

Nancy and Marwa, despite engaging in premarital sex, articulate their relationship to their bodies in very distinct terms. Whereas Nancy is confident in her choice, and draws legitimacy from the safety provided by her immediate family and her circle of friends, Marwa fears losing legitimacy if her non-virgin status is revealed. Instead, she resigns herself to a power relation where sexual favours are offered in return of her partner's silence. Moreover, her partner never took the initiative to buy condoms or contraceptives, something Marwa is scared of doing herself in case “someone might see her”. Clearly, in the case of Marwa, sisters are not doing it for themselves. Although her actions add to the myth of Lebanon's sexual tolerance, her story reveals a renewed patriarchal interpretation of sex: premarital sex could well be on the increase in Lebanon, but it is enacted within the same framework that reiterates gendered notions of honour and shame.

Nancy embodies sexual dissidence as presented earlier, an embodied social knowledge she shares with her boyfriend and her immediate surrounding where gender equality and assertiveness of choice prevail. In a way, she is displaying a woman's agency on a full-scale, something that many women in Lebanon cannot achieve. Her relationship to her body greatly differs from Marwa's, whose engagement in premarital sex was causing her lots of grievance at the time of the interview. The gap between sexual practice and its meaning in the case of Marwa has been written about premarital sex in Lebanon, be it in online magazines, blogs, or journals. In addition, an increasing number of TV programs assert an increase in premarital sex, despite the absence of official data.¹² Moreover, statistical data, even if it existed, would not be able to account for the very different nature of the lived experience of sex as seen above in the examples of Nancy and Marwa. Additionally, and in one¹³ of the few comprehensive studies done (they are often done parallel to medical research centred on sexual health rather than sexuality), approval of hymenoplasty was low among participants regardless of gender (25.7% men vs. 19.1% women) and religious affiliations (22.5% Muslims vs. 22.3% Christians), and arguments for rejection were rooted in both moral ethics and personal convictions. Such findings point towards an apparent active sex life that continues to feed into modern Lebanon's myth of sexual tolerance – a

myth long supported by the overly sexualized appeal of its pop female singers, by the surreal storylines of locally produced soap operas, and by the remnants of a notorious nightlife and a thriving sex industry, both cut short in the mid 1970's when civil war broke out.

Still, the ensemble of such indicators invites us to view sexuality in Lebanon as a tool of regulation and control, and to use sexuality in order to identify sites of agency and transgression. Lastly, the fact that premarital sex in private universities has become normalized does not necessarily reflect a change in the attitude towards the meaning of the female body, since many students, like Marwa, adhere to sexual practice in the absence of personal agency whatsoever. In Marwa's case, the apparent dissidence of her engaging in premarital sex is no more than a renewed patriarchy where the act does not resonate with its meaning.

Dissident Bodies and Gender Activists: Strange Bedfellows?

At first sight, it is easy to confuse "dissident bodies" with gender activists. Examples of dissident bodies include men and women who cohabit without marriage, queer individuals acknowledging their sexuality in public, or young women challenging their families and travelling abroad to pursue their education despite being disowned; all of which entails disagreement with local discourses of what a body means or how a body ought to be regulated, a central point to gender activism. This is not to say that dissident bodies did not exist before. However, they are becoming increasingly visible in public, in magazines, social media, and on TV stations. Moreover, and this is the main argument of this paper, many of Lebanon's dissident bodies distance themselves from gender activists, fearing that a politicization of their body would lead to a hastened exposure that hinders the social consent that quietly grants them a space for self-expression. This point is particularly true when we consider the sensationalist tone that accompanies the increased mainstreaming of the lived experience of dissident bodies, as seen in popular TV talk shows.

Indeed, the recent openness of dissident bodies makes them accessible to scrutiny, judgement, public debate, and questioning. However, this increased visibility lacks in identifying agency, especially since it is often accompanied by sensational and essentialist debates. The sensational character, which often accompanies such debates, makes me particularly interested in the lived experience of dissident bodies. Interestingly, she found that many dissident bodies are not necessarily concerned with transforming their lifestyle choices into a social cause, as gathered from the empirical work, and hail Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance because it allows them to negotiate and seek consent from their immediate social surrounding. It was important, then, for me, to interview dissident men and women and situate their agency in relation to local discourses on sexuality, gender roles, and gender activism in Lebanon.

Interestingly, the data gathered reveals a break between gender activism and sexuality in the context of post-war Lebanon. It found that many gender activists question the morality of the choices made by "dissident bodies", an expression I coin to refer to those men and women who challenge Lebanon's norms of sexuality, particularly where questions related to honour and shame still prevail. At the same time, many dissident bodies distance themselves from gender activists, fearing that a politicization of their choices could lead to a hastened exposure that hinders the social consent that quietly grants them a space for self-expression. Most interesting, dissident bodies are highly likely to be politically apathetic,

often dis-identifying themselves with Lebanon's crumbling sectarian political system. Those of them who aspire for social change insist on fusing the question of sexuality with democratic processes such as the freedom of expression, and prefer to operate in what I call "societal bubbles", working on minute communitarian levels, starting with friends and family – a reality that compels me to speak of a "quiet sexual revolution" currently taking hold of Lebanon. Dissident bodies' political apathy, though, does not amount to depoliticization, since they embody and deploy their body politics on a communitarian level, building networks where connectivity follows patterns that differ from Lebanon's "patriarchal connectivity". Patriarchal connectivity is an expression coined and defined by Suad Joseph to refer to Lebanon's local type of patriarchy where selves emerge as related to others rather than separate from others.¹⁴ Patriarchal connectivity entails "the production of selves with fluid boundaries organized for gender and age domination in a culture valorising kin structures, [prevailing] morality, and idioms". Alternatively, dissident bodies emerge as separate selves who connect to other separate selves with whom they share a common lexicon of renewed moralistic and religious rubrics, and where the impact of kin connectivity is considerably attenuated. Such findings, particularly where political apathy is concerned, resonate with recent observations made by civil society in Lebanon.¹⁵ Since both gender activism and sexual dissidence encompass an element of transgression, it is important to distinguish the two.

Prior to Lebanon's independence in 1943, the 'mil?t, or factory girls working in silk factories, resorted to strikes in the 1890's, as a way to claim control over the labor. One can argue that their demands were not purely economical, seeing the "disapproving pressure in stares" and the "tainted" reputation they had to put up with.¹⁶

Since 1943, women's mobilizations were often accompanied by a nationalist agenda where women were encouraged to partake in the national project. Since the end of the civil war, women started rallying around political demands such as the right to vote or the right to pass citizenship to their children. Such mobilization is often the fruit of the planned work of activists who adhere to and mobilize according to a strict agenda and a set of action plans. In the 2000s, a number of gender activists, both men and women, have been mobilizing to promote demands that span beyond the political to include gender identity and sexual rights. However, these new demands, despite being necessary for the achievement of gender equality, in addition to being in tune with the aspirations and affects of a globally-exposed young generation, are often frowned upon, with many anticipating the dire consequences of engulfing sexuality in legal terms instead of social consent. At least, this was the main concern of the many dissident bodies interviewed, who distance themselves from gender activists and embody their sexuality in societal bubbles where connectivity to others operate along shared moralistic values. These newly emerging societal bubbles differ from Lebanon's traditional pattern of patriarchal connectivity in that they are inhibited by individual selves that relate to others not through kin and clientelism, but through a shared lexicon of honour and shame (non-traditional and taboo-defying), in addition to apathetic political views.

Nancy, for instance, responded harshly when I remarked to her that the way she articulates her womanhood is reminiscent of a feminist rhetoric. She cut me short quickly and asserted:

"I can't stand gender activists. They all suck up to politicians... You know, I don't care whether I get to vote or not, whether I get elected or not... This is the least of my concerns. I hate politics!

Why does everything have to be politicized in this country?[17](#)

Nancy distances herself from gender activists in Lebanon because she does not trust the political system in place. In her own words, “I only have to deal with my family and friends ... I do not want to have a law which would prohibit me from having sex...Anyway, it would never pass.”

Nancy’s cynicism is not surprising once her views on sexuality are contrasted with those of Elsa (borrowed name), a self-identified gender activist. Elsa is a 23 years old woman who volunteers with 3 gender-focused NGOs. Not only that, she works for an international NGO based in Beirut. In her words, the totality of her salary is disposable. She makes sure she wears different clothes to work everyday. She travels for leisure at least twice a year, and considers herself a devoted feminist. When I asked her to describe a typical day in the life of her activist self, Elsa responded:

“I usually attend all major events related to gender empowerment... You know, I know many sayyid?t al mojtama’ [literally translates of women from high society] in person... Whenever KAFA [a prominent local NGO that combats gender-based violence] mobilizes women, I am the first to jump in ...”[18](#)

Elsa reminded me of many women I have come to interact with during my research. Such young women are very well informed about gender justice, in theory. Their activism, nevertheless, remains trapped in an elitist pattern of the Western-educated young woman, often perceived as unaware of her privilege, campaigning for the rights of less-advantaged women. I tried to challenge Elsa by enquiring about her opinion on cohabitation before marriage, to which she replied, “I guess it is OK with me if others are doing it... I wouldn’t do it... no way [in English]!... I just can’t see myself doing it”. I then asked her, “what if your best friend decided to cohabit with her partner?” She jokingly replied, “Come one... Don’t make it any harder on me!”.

Although Elsa describes herself as a gender activist, her privileged background, combined with her typical upbringing, and her upper social circle is in many ways conformist. When confronted with an imaginary situation of sexual dissidence, she was clear in her categorical refusal. Elsa invites us to conceive the links between gender activism and embodiment. With women’s bodies being central to gender activism, how can we understand Elsa’s rejection of dissident behavior? In other words, is there a limit to gender activism?

Although increasingly vocal about their sexual rights and gender identity demands, gender activists are widening the gap between women and men in post-war Lebanon. This remark is important because the impact of Lebanon’s civil war on, combined with its confessional system must be examined as part of a multi-disciplinary exercise in order to assess the opportunities and threats that women and similarly marginalised social categories face today, two decades since the end of the civil war.

I stated earlier that it is easy to confuse dissident bodies with an embodied activism that seeks to challenge rigid patriarchal understandings of gender norms. As can be seen in some of the samples presented in this paper, dissidence and activism do not share a singular lexicon, and although political and social movement theory have already developed a nuanced understanding of both, this paper shows such nuances through a gender lens.

Dissident bodies differ from gender activism in Lebanon on many levels. On the first hand, dissident bodies are self-operative and do not necessarily mobilize or engage in nation-scale gender activism. Gathered data from the fieldwork suggests that sexual dissidence does not necessarily amount to gender activism, despite the centrality of the body to both. This is not to say that gender activists cannot be sexually dissident at the same, as I witnessed during my fieldwork. This is particularly true for those activists who include sexual rights in their activism. However, the majority of gender activists in Lebanon continue to mobilise within the frame of political dissent exclusively, with little importance given to feminist accounts on embodiment or the body as a social signifier. In this case, gender activism in Lebanon can be seen as fractured, from an embodiment lens, with political demands and sexual expression seen as disconnected.

Secondly, dissident bodies are self-operative. Their non-conformist interpretation of the body is shared on minute communitarian levels, unlike the widespread scale of gender activism per se. They deploy their sexuality in societal bubbles where social consent rather than political coverage is sought. In a few successful cases, like Nancy's, the family is accepting. In this case, we can talk of a liberal environment, out of the three identified by Sidawi and presented above. In most cases though, dissident bodies collate in custom-built bubbles, as is the case of D.D. is originally from Tripoli. She has been disowned by her family, more precisely her father, in 2010 after she refused to return to settle in Lebanon after completing her BA degree in Germany. For D., it was "out of the question" for her to return to Lebanon after completing a bio-medical degree with distinction. In her words, she says:

"I have seen many female friends return to Lebanon after studying abroad just to sit at home and wait for the perfect groom [*'ariss*]. I don't understand this."¹⁹

Today, D. is well settled in Germany. She says she "loves it" because she is "not reminded daily of her woman status." She has a well-paid job and hopes she will buy her first house in the year to come. D. challenged the entirety of her milieu by rewriting her own version of what it means to be D. D. is not a woman waiting to be dictated. When I asked how she felt about being "disowned" by her family, she said:

"..My mom has been speaking to me lately... I miss her so much [her eyes became watery and a moment of silence followed]... I know she's standing by my father because she has nowhere else to go...you know, she used to transfer me money from her own allowance, as my scholarship was insufficient at times."

[Me: "what about your father?"]

"Of course I had to have my father's thumbs up before going, but to him, it seems it was just a way to show off to his friends... it's like my achievements as a woman were a tool for him to promote his modern side, which I doubt it... however, my younger sis tells me that my parents are rather permissive with her... I sure wasn't permitted to go out as much and as late as she is..."[20](#)

In the case of D., she is creating her own network of friends whom she visits regularly. That her parents have become "more permissive" with her sister is not inclusive to the changing attitude of parents vis-à-vis youth leisurely time. It is a mechanism of coping deployed by parents in an attempt to encourage their younger children to "enjoy home better", something which was not possible for their older siblings, seeing the many prohibitions and the over-protection they put up with during the days of the civil war. Moreover, and although the proportion of Lebanese women migrants is increasing rapidly, many of these women do so for marriage purposes, often marrying a Lebanese man residing abroad. Equally, the majority of Lebanese women who migrate for work purposes return at some point to marry local men. In both cases, they continue to reiterate Lebanon's connective patterns and the privileging of kin relationships, albeit on a transnational level.[21](#)

How dissident bodies create their societal bubbles and deploy their body politics can be found in the example of M. and G. M. and G. are two friends who self-identify as lesbian. They are both in their early 30's. They have both studied in the US and are currently residing and working in Beirut. They are young professionals who earn above average and are both looking for "love and stability". They described to me the long and painful road they took in order to transform the lexicon used by their parents when referring to LGBT individuals. For years, M. and G. scrutinised the media and pointed out the achievements of gay and lesbian celebrities liked by their parents who were often unaware of their sexuality. They stopped their parents from referring to gay individuals as *sh?dh*, a pejorative idiom that is used to label anything that differs from the norm, gay men in particular. For M. and G., the simple fact that their parents now use the word *mithliyy*, which is the Arabic translation for homosexual, instead of *sh?dh* is in itself an achievement. Although they are not affiliated with any NGO and do not officially support a specific political party, they consider themselves activists, and rightly so. M. and G. work quietly, within their custom-built bubble in their attempt to reclaim their sexuality. They both see proximity as necessary for achieving social change. And although D. shares many of M. and G.'s lived experience, both operate in distinct societal bubbles separated by a physical space (D. is from Tripoli whereas M. and G. are from Beirut).

How a dissident interpretation of the body conflates with gender activism can also be found among the LGBT population of Lebanon. In an interview conducted with a focus group of gay and transsexual women, all of them members of HELEM, a local NGO that fights for LGBT rights in Lebanon notably the elimination of Article 534 which states that any sexual intercourse "contrary to nature" is punishable by up to 1 year in prison, it was rather unexpected to find out that many of them articulate and reproduce shame in rather normative ways. For instance, when discussing fashion with them, many found it "ayb", or shameful, when their favourite female star Maya Diab appeared on television the night before wearing a dress that was "too much!". The consensus was "where does she think she is? This is

Lebanon, but still..." I remarked to them that I found it intriguing that they would uphold a conservative sense of fashion. A. (not his real name) jumped, and said,

"Exactly! That's the very problem! ... People assume we're just perverts... They don't realise that we live in the same society as them! ... If I am in Lebanon, I am going to respect its rules."[22](#)

For A. and the rest of the group, their activism is reproduced within the existing framework of shame. Their situation can be described as "impossible" since a queer body, a highly gendered and oppressed one in Lebanon is being reclaimed within the existing framework that limits its possibility. However, their situation seems plausible once we consider recent accusations made against Helem's handling of sexual harassment within its premises. The piece in question referred to Helem as "a microcosm of gender-based violence", citing character assassination, shaming, and silencing among its tactics.[23](#) Again, this example highlights a split between existing and novel interpretations of the body in post-war Lebanon's gender activism.

Whereas male privilege was the culprit for the near collapse of Helem, class privilege continues to stand in the face of women activists in Lebanon, with their cause becoming increasingly NGO-ized, and their lived experience confined to reports prepared by highly educated and often privileged few.[24](#)

The extracts offered have been deliberately chosen seeing the limited space provided. Although they do not reveal the totality of the complexities that ensues from an asymmetrical reading of the body between sexually dissident bodies and gender activists in Lebanon, they suffice to indicate several points. Sexual dissidence and gender activism are not necessarily co-constitutive of each other, since no single understanding of morality prevail, and since political rights at times overlook sexual rights. It is important to bear in mind that the samples provided neglect, to a great extent, the obstacle that confessionalism brings to gender activists in Lebanon. Instead, they indicate that sexual dissidence is embodied by apolitical subjects who successfully cross the confessional barriers of Lebanon and construct safe spaces, or societal bubbles, where Lebanon's sectarian system of political representation is considerably belittled.

The intersectionality of location, gender, sexuality, class, level of education, level and nature of connectivity, and so on, is mandatory when examining the differences and similarities between dissident sexualities and gender activists in the classical sense. At the same time, dissident bodies deploy an activism that does not always follow a pre-set agenda. Theirs can be spontaneous, simply embodied, or contagious. But all in all, there is no denying that men and women in Lebanon are constantly facing new interpretations, imageries, ideologies, and realities that transform their potential to act.

Overall, there is no denying that activism in Lebanon is becoming increasingly engaged with matters of gender inequality. Both conventional and social media seem to be playing a major role in facilitating the circulation of information related to feminist thinking, stories of local gender-based violence survivors, in addition to offering a platform from which dissident bodies and activists can express themselves. At the

same time, the nuances of activism and dissidence, as presented here above, are such that both are perceived and deployed asymmetrically seeing the intersectionality of a number of factors. From the data gathered from the fieldwork, it seems that some gender activists perceive dissident bodies as “too much at times”, in the sense that their dissidence is perceived as “too radical”, to the extent it hinders the progress already made. Equally, some dissident bodies accuse gender activists of being “not enough radical”, particularly where sexual rights are overlooked, preferring instead to distance themselves from them. Such a discrepancy in perception reinforces dissidence as a spectrum, as I pointed out earlier, with class, level of education, personal aspirations, and connectivity, playing major roles. Similarly, the work of NGOs and local organizations are also seen as “too foreign”, or “too systematic”, in the sense that their narrative is not easily accessible to a great number of women, a point shared with a recent work of gender politics in Lebanon.²⁵ Many of these organizations and NGOs rely on the patronage of sectarian leaders – who are responsible of delaying legislations aimed at gender equality, or on foreign funding. Also, tough competition and limited opportunities to funding translate in more weight being allocated to priorities set by the donors at times, rather than those identified in reality.²⁶

This brings the paper to its third point where it argues that dissident bodies are an expected manifestation of post-war Lebanon where modernity is rushed, national reconciliation abandoned, and individual values are replacing the repetitive failures of the State. Still, despite the transgressing element they carry, dissident bodies remain trapped in a patriarchy that has renewed itself in a far more chaotic and unrestrained way, often facilitated by matters of security and increased militarization.

A Renewed Patriarchy in a Time of Crisis

Lebanon's emergence as a unified nation, like many of its Arab counterparts, is a gendered tale. Several scholars have examined the gendered aspect of nation-building. For Anne McClintock, "nationalism is a gendered discourse and cannot be understood without a theory of gender power."²⁷ Cynthia Enloe captures the masculine aspect of memory, humiliation, and hope that spring from nationalism and the relegation of women to symbolic roles throughout.²⁸ Nationalism, then, is profoundly inscribed in the lived experience of men whereas women's role is rather representative.

In early 20th century, during the independence movements in the Arab world, women got caught up in the nationalist discourse as "authentic representatives of the nation". Nira Yuval-Davis famously argued that women's "burden of representation has also brought the construction of women as bearers of the collectivity's honour."²⁹ Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod questions "the way modernity is easily equated with the question of woman."³⁰ But how does this "burden of representation" link to this paper's discussion of dissident bodies?

The link is down to the essentially masculine nature of modernity in post-war Lebanon. As Marie-Claude Thomas points out, "women [in Lebanon] are a symbol of modernity through their visibility within their own communities, and in relation to western ideas."³¹ In the same vein, Michael Johnson argues that the notion of honour in Lebanon is embedded in modernity itself,³² and that honour is to a great extent embedded in connectivity to strong male members of the public.

Johnson argues that modern leadership in post-war Lebanon, which bases itself on patron-client

relationships, is associated with an "aggressive assertion of honour" and supporters admire male leaders who do not hesitate to use force in order to promote their clients' interests.³³ Patron-client relationship, as the core of Lebanese politics, has been widely examined by Suad Joseph.³⁴ Unlike feudal leaders, modern male leaders promote a form of "populism" in Lebanon where an "increasingly democratic political system" goes hand in hand with "aggressive honour".³⁵

This examination allows us to view honour in post-war Lebanon as fundamentally male, where women reiterate their representative role through the public display of the alliances between the males they are related to, by initiating social events and private visits, and by refraining from socializing with those who fall beyond the connective circle of the males they are connected to. This mode of connectivity is strongly entrenched in Lebanon's confessional structure, which is reproduced legally in the sectarian nature of its political representation. Dissident bodies reclaim their bodies by trespassing Lebanon's mode of connectivities and by building alliances with other selves who equally distance themselves from it. The long-lasting nature of the friendships and alliances they quietly build can be contrasted with the general tendency in Lebanon. One example of this general tendency is for male and female university students, who have built friendships in the multi-confessional setting of the university, to revert to the model of patriarchal connectivity once they graduate, and to look for prospective partners who share their confessional background.

Lebanon's confessionalism, can be viewed as a form of self-preservation that maintains the rights of each of its sectarian communities, which is often upheld through the assertion, election, and reelection of male sectarian leaders. In addition to the confessional deadlock that characterizes it, modern Lebanon, as Samir Khalaf argues is embedded in "consumerism" and "embellishing one's image", with the capital Beirut becoming "unrivalled as the marketing capital of the Arab world" and remarks on the "excessive commodification" of both products and consumers.³⁶ Not only this, patriotism itself has become a commodity through which certain groups can contest another's groups "level" of patriotism, as was duly observed during the 2005 so-called Cedar Revolution, when thousands of Lebanese citizens gathered in Beirut to swear an oath to protect Lebanon regardless of their faith and call for an end to Syria's hegemony of Lebanon. Among the most prominent aspects of the gathering is the branding of patriotism through the heavy marketing of the "cedar-as-national-emblem". It is in this vein that Assem Nasr conceptualises consumption as a form of resistance in Lebanon, since "accumulating goods gives the illusion of a cosmopolitan sphere."³⁷ Where women are concerned, they come to symbolise the degree of "success" of their male relatives. From bigger houses to extravagant outfits, every excess is permitted in this race towards reclaiming modernity, often at the expense of crucial social and human priorities. One could argue that women and marginalised social bodies, are encouraged by their dominant male counterparts to bypass certain patriarchal constraints for the sake of said "modernity". Such indirect manipulation allows the proliferation of modernity myths, including the myth of Lebanon's relaxed attitude vis-a-vis sexual expression, which is easily discredited once we recognize its regulatory role.

Dissident bodies' concern over the politicization of their sexuality is well-founded once we recognize the instrumental use of sexual expression in both governance and the military in Lebanon. Sexuality serves to challenge governance at the same time as it upholds it. That is evident in the sexist nature of a recent campaign launched by Lebanon's ministry of tourism where the male gaze is evident as the camera zooms on the bodies of "Lebanon's women" who prefer the bikini, it seems, to any other type

of dress.³⁸ Sexuality, in this case, plays the role of the signifier of a peculiar modernity where sexuality follows strictly patriarchal patterns. This is particularly true seeing recent raids on a movie theatre and a *ʿammam*, or bathhouse, where homosexual men were allegedly gathering.³⁹

Moreover, sexuality occupies an important space in the rampant militarization of the country. This militarization follows recent events that include armed sectarian clashes in the city of Tripoli, the continuous influx of Syrian refugees, and the reiteration of irresponsible and popular discourses juxtaposing the "criminal Syrian lay man" and the "revered Lebanese soldier". Such an intensification of male dominance leads to what Cynthia Cockburn calls an "ethic of purity".⁴⁰

When an "ethic of purity" prevails, women and marginalised selves become a tool to distinguish a community from another. This is seen in the renewal of racial confrontations between the Lebanese population and the Syrian refugees⁴¹ for example, or in increasingly violent cases of domestic violence. Both scenarios recall a masculinity in crisis struggling to come to terms with a plunging economy, increased unemployment, and a high immigration rate.

The discourse of the "revered Lebanese soldier", along with a renewed nationalism have become normalised through recent ads purporting gender equality in Lebanon's military institutions, be it in the army, the General Directorate of General Security (GSD), or the Internal Security Forces (ISF). This depiction, nonetheless, is not accurate, since the female body is exclusive to administrative and non-combatant roles. Additionally, an array of gendered bodies, including victims of gender-based violence, queer individuals, and sex workers are often reluctant to contact the ISF when they need it most, seeing the "macho institutional culture" that permeates it, or out of fear of being humiliated or abused, either verbally or physically.⁴² If anything, these campaigns "imagine" a "united nation", mostly in the face of destitute refugees, themselves sidelined by sectarian political rivalry, where men and women concurrently upholds its values, be them moralistic, religious, or economical, i.e., consumption-as-resistance.⁴³

Dissident bodies, it seems, are a natural consequence of the Lebanese state's failure in fostering a national home where social, moral, and religious values are clear. In many ways, they represent the artificial response to a failing state that acknowledges its failures by turning a blind eye to what it deceitfully acts upon as politics of pleasure instead of politics of identity. Said failures are leading to increasingly individualistic and self-interpretative laws where social and religious moral rubrics are being re-written in the absence of egalitarian laws.⁴⁴ Depending on one's religion, class, sect, location, age, and gender, ordinary citizens find themselves both innovators and censors of dissident sexualities.

Paradoxically, the repetitive failure of the Lebanese state to deal with imminent political and social problems is leading to a political apathy where Lebanese citizens are "sick to the bones" of Lebanon's shambolic web of religion, politics, and governance. This "sickness" was repeatedly encountered during the fieldwork. It is from such a perspective that many dissident bodies found it necessary to break all ties with Lebanon's sectarian political system, which they see as "corrupt beyond any imagination", with the ruling class along with the religious institutions dictating and reinforcing body politics that do not include the privileged few to whom they are connected.

The cynicism displayed by dissident bodies vis-à-vis the ruling class is not limited to them, as seen in the recent example of Olympic skier Jackie Chamoun. The immediate cause that led Lebanese people to support Jackie is "the innocence of her exposed boobs" compared to the mis-governance of Lebanese politicians who are directly responsible for current internal conflicts, the alarming increase in unemployment, continuous self-imposed exiles, and worst of all, the crippling fear of the next car bombing. Still, many feminists in Lebanon questioned this sudden support, arguing instead that we view it for its reality: a male gaze disguised in feminist claims. However, and where Jackie Chamoun unquestionably hails from a highly privileged background - being the great-granddaughter of the Lebanese ex-president Camille Chamoun, and can hence afford the "scandal" of an exposed cleavage, the same cannot be said about the recent apparition on TV of Mohammad and Ghaith, or Jennifer, who recently declared their love for each other on national TV.⁴⁵ What is important in both cases is to transform the debate from propaganda and tabloid criticism to a focus on the interplay between perception, sexuality, and public opinion.

Conversely, the insistence of gender activists and the wider civil movement to push for gender reforms makes us consider the benefits of a fragmented society since it provides a grey area, albeit fragile, where negotiation with the Other is possible as long the "bubbles" remain distinct.

These bubbles, as presented earlier, allow people to challenge taboos and to re-organise their connectivity, unlike the highly male nature of official laws where such negotiations would not be possible.

Lastly, the fieldwork allowed me to capture the immediate impact of sexual dissidence on both the individual and the communal level. On the level of the individual, class, religion, and further important factors, play a significant role in enabling embodied resistance. For example, of the three interviewed couples who are cohabiting without marriage, one came from a significantly privileged background where they "didn't have to explain themselves to anyone"; the second couple, identifying as middle-class, had recently moved to Beirut and presented itself as brother and sister to the outside world; the third couple's dynamics almost amounted to "sex slavery", with T. (a recently widowed Maronite woman who "had lost everything" and "has no one to turn to") accepting to cohabit with H. (a married Shi'i man who spends most of his time in his "official" household), provided she acquiesces to his sexual demands. Her partner, not wanting to marry her because he didn't want to include her in his inheritance, according to T., in return, offers her shelter. These three examples require a more lengthy analysis. However, they suffice to make us ponder on Lebanon's myth of sexual tolerance, made extremely accessible by the explosion of communication tools and irresponsible articles that fail to recognize the totality of the complexities and injustices encountered in the lived experiences. After all, T. has to put up with the endless stares and verbal abuse of her surrounding. The constant interrogation of this myth is necessary because its consequences are affecting in serious ways the way the lived experience of women and further marginalised bodies in Lebanon is being hijacked by dominant institutions in their reiteration of patriarchal power structures.

At the communal level, it could be argued that societal bubbles, though non-related geographically nor religiously, are emerging far and wide across post-war Lebanon. What connects them is their wilful distancing from what they perceive as a "failing state", and an embodied resistance carried on a minute level, far from official organs. Unlike its Arab neighbours who mobilized on a massive scale for

demands, it seems Lebanon's revolution is a "quiet" one, where sexuality, rather than political reform, is key, and where the bedroom, rather than the street, is the space for mobilization. These findings resonate with recent recommendations made Maya Mikdashi, who invites us to critically re-interrogate the categories of personal status and sect, and consider the categories of sex and gender instead as foundational to Lebanese citizenship⁴⁶

This is considerably evident seeing the insistence of dissident bodies to fuse sexuality with freedom of expression, in addition to dis-identifying with Lebanon's fractional system of political representation.

It remains to say that this paper follows an anthropological approach and works through the framework of feminist' interpretation of the body. It is the first side-project of a larger thesis. In many ways it is an ontological exercise where the body is examined less in epistemological terms, notably social constructivism, and more in existential ways. However, both philosophies are inherently linked since the imagined body ought to coincide with its material condition sooner or later.

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