

Feminisms in Lebanon: after proving loyalty to the “Nation”, will the “Body” rise within the “Arab Spring”?

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Abstract:

The research explores different waves of feminism in Lebanon since the 50s and the establishment of the nation-state, to the rise of the New Left in the 70s, as well as the subsequent leftist post-Civil War divisions, the globalisation of the feminist cause in the 90s, and the advent of “new issues” in relation to physical rights. These issues, which developed as part of the anti-imperialist and alter-globalisation movements at the beginning of the second millennium, remain relevant today amid ongoing uprisings in the region. The research also addresses the existing correlation between these “waves” and Lebanon’s patriarchal system and examines the reconfiguration and/or renewal of emerging movements amid current uprisings.

Keywords: Women's Movement, Social Movements, Arab World, Feminist

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Today, women's rights and violence against them are mobilizing new sectors of society, while feminist movements in Lebanon emerge in a particularly restrictive context: a patriarchal and segmented society characterized by sectarianism.¹

The confessional system sees society in the form of specific groups, (in this case, the confessions, but also extended families) reducing individuals to their “primary” identity and undermining or making the process of individuation and the development of other identities more problematic, on one hand. On the other hand, the personal status laws are particularly discriminatory against women (divorce, inheritance, guardianship laws ...).

¹ Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy. A theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 212; Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and State*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, p. 348; Suad Joseph, *Gendering Citizenship in the Middle-East*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 400.

At a first glance, it can be said that a section of Lebanese women enjoy a margin of freedom not found in some neighboring countries. Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 (though with reservations on Articles 9, 16 and 29). Experts maintain that some progress was made in the field of education, particularly higher education. Article 562 of the penal code regarding honor crimes was abolished in 2011, and lately, in 2014, the Lebanese parliament legislated the protection of women from domestic violence.

However, Lebanon was ranked 123rd out of 136 countries, according to the global report on the gender gap published in October 2013 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Geneva.² Discriminatory legal provisions against women persist in the religious laws of personal status and the Lebanese Penal Code – the acquittal of a convicted rapist if he marries the victim is an example (Article 522). Domestic violence and marital rape are a nationwide problem; according to a study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), more than two thirds of women in Lebanon suffer from some form of domestic violence.³ Moreover, the Lebanese law forbids a woman to pass on her nationality to her children or her husband, which raises the intricate and interrelated issues of citizenship, identity, sectarianism, and personal status.

In this context, this paper examines the nature of mobilizations initiated by feminist movements in the country, as well as the structure and trajectory of their feminist activists. Here, a broad definition of feminism is adopted, which includes movements that do not necessarily claim an affiliation to a feminist philosophical school of thought. Moreover, philosophical affiliation is a central issue facing feminist movements in Arab countries in general and Lebanon in particular. In fact, they are accused of being vectors of Westernization, while feminist movements were born and developed in the context of the struggle for independence. The paper proposes to extract this polemic from the essentialist differentiation between western feminism and eastern feminism, to study the historical context in which each movement emerged and developed.

While this paper delineates the study to organized women movements in a timeframe starting from the formation of the Lebanese state, it argues that the feminist movement in Lebanon is organized in waves, as other feminist movements around the world.⁴

These waves are often born in response to a specific “event”; in fact, these “waves” could be analytically compared to the concept of “cycle of mobilizations” developed by Sidney Tarrow, who defines them as just a “growing then decreasing wave of collective actions and reactions

² World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2013, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf.

³ UNFPA and Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, *Situation Analysis in Gender Based Violence in Lebanon*, 2011, <http://www.unfpa.org.lb/Documents/1-Situation-Analysis-of-GBV-in-Lebanon.aspx>

⁴ On the successive waves of feminism, read the first chapter of the book: Charlotte Krolokke, Anne Scott Sorensen, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses From Silence to Performance*, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005, p. 208.

closely linked to them”⁵, which includes three phases: the “ascending phase of revolt, that of the ‘moment of madness’ when everything seems possible, a zenith phase marked by the radicalization of actions, and a downturn, itself punctuated four times (the creation of new organizations, the routinization of collective action, the satisfaction even if partial of the demands, disengagement).”⁶ This paper opts to use the term “waves”⁷, because it is generally used to account for women’s movements around the world.

While this paper investigates the capacity of feminist organizations to attain social change, it also looks into their ambivalent relationship with the Lebanese patriarchy, their proximity to the dominant players in the political field, and their difficulty to distance themselves from the hegemonic structures. These feminists tend to censor themselves when it comes to talking about their own bodies and their sexuality, although oppression is based on their essence as women and the control by men and by patriarchal society of the same female body. I argue here that the feminist movement in Lebanon has two main characteristics; its matrix is a national movement from independence to the liberation of the south, not a movement for civil rights, like the one studied by Tarrow. Furthermore, feminist claims are appropriated by men instead of a more radical distinction.

This research proceeds from a socio-historical analysis of discourses and agendas of women’s organizations in Lebanon. It attempts to analyze the dynamics of the feminist movement in a historical perspective and measure the social, cultural, and political factors that facilitate or hinder the historical development of this movement. The empirical research was based on a survey of seven feminist organizations and campaigns: The Lebanese Council of Women (LCW), *lajnat hukûk al-mar’at* (League of Women’s Rights - LWR), *al-tajammu’ al-nisâ’i al-dimucratî al-lubnanî* (Democratic Gathering of Lebanese Women - RDFL), *al-lajnat al-ahliat li-mutaba’at qadâya al-mar’a* (the National Committee for the Follow up of Women’s Issues - CFUWI) *Nasawiya*, *Kafa ‘onf wa istighlal* (Kafa enough of violence and exploitation), *Jinsiyati haqq li wa li ousrati* (my nationality is my right and my family’s).

Observations were also made in the cited associations (observation of meetings, conferences, etc.). These active observations’ objective was to better understand the structures of these associations, to identify activists’ profiles, and to understand key issues taken up by these associations. A series of interviews (semi-structured) were also conducted with women activists in the ten aforementioned associations (fifteen interviews in all). They aimed at better understanding the disposition of activists towards feminist commitment, the meaning they give to their activism, the causes they defend, their positioning within the Lebanese patriarchy, etc. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews was to better understand feminist activism in

⁵ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁶ Isabelle Sommier, “ Cycle de mobilisation”, in, Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, Cécile Péchu, *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, Presses de Science Po, 2009, p. 173.

⁷ Term used in the early 1990s in the United States to highlight the evolution of feminist thought.

Lebanon. By allowing an in-depth look into the discourse of those surveyed, delivering more information about their history, their experiences, their perception of feminist activism, their motivations, hesitations and ambiguities, this method allowed an understanding of the subjectivity of social actors, and their own point of view of their action and events in which they participated, their worldviews, etc.

The presentation of the findings is organized into two parts. The first section highlights the conditions of the chronological emergence of the various feminist waves in Lebanon; the second section discusses the distance between feminist actions in Lebanon and the confessional and patriarchal system.

1. Feminist waves in Lebanon in a historical perspective:

The first section will focus on tracing the history of feminist movements in the Lebanese local context, on the one hand, and by highlighting the continuities and ruptures, which existed with movements or organizations that preceded them, on the other hand. Thus, four “waves” of feminist movements were identified since the independence of Lebanon: the first, was founded in 1943 with independence. The second wave appeared following the “disappointment” engendered by the Arab defeat of 1967 and the rise of a “new left”.⁸ The third wave was established in the context of post-civil-war Lebanon, which pointed to the particular rise of NGOs⁹. Finally, the fourth wave appeared with the anti-war and anti-globalization movement in the early 2000s.¹⁰

A short historical overview

Most studies take the early nineteenth century as a starting point for the examination of social movements and especially women’s movements in the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon (even before its formation as an independent state). This period began with the “Egyptian campaign” led by Napoleon Bonaparte, and later, the rise of Arab liberalism, also called the “Arab Cultural Renaissance” (*al-Nahda*). In fact, the issue of women became of central importance toward the mid-nineteenth century:

“The pioneers of the Nahdah regarded women’s inferior status as the basic cause for the backwardness of the Arab and Islamic societies, and were unanimous in affirming that

⁸ On the “new left” of the 1960s, please refer to the doctoral thesis of Agnès Favier: Agnès Favier, *Logiques de l’engagement et mode de contestation au Liban. Genèse d’une génération de militants intellectuels (1958-1975)*, PhD thesis, Paul Cézanne University, Aix-Marseille III, 2004.

⁹ On this point, please refer to Karam Karam, *Le mouvement civil au Liban. Revendications, protestations et mobilisations associatives dans l’après-guerre*, Paris, Karthala, 2006.

¹⁰ On this cycle of mobilization; Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, *L’altermondialisme au Liban : un militantisme de passage. Logiques d’engagement et reconfiguration de l’espace militant (de gauche) au Liban*, PhD thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013.

there will be no renaissance for Arabs and Muslims without the renaissance of Arab women.”¹¹

These were men and a minority of women of the educated elite who contributed to the emergence of a movement for the “renaissance” of “the woman”, as explained by Caroline Sukkar in her research on the women’s movement in Lebanon. The pioneers of this movement, Butros al-Bustani, Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, Gamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, Qasim Amin, Jubran Khalil Jubran, Amin al-Rihani, and May Ziyadeh, all contemplated the education of women of aristocracy, or a bourgeoisie – confined to her home to better educate her children.¹²

An exception to this dominant view in relation to the education of women is personified by Nazira Zein el-Din who confronted religious traditions. She opposed the veil and defended the right of women to participate in power and contribute to the explanation of religious texts. Her critique of the law against the veil led to a violent reaction on the part of the clergy, who accused her of atheism, mobilizing demonstrations against her.¹³

The claim to women’s right to education was pursued with the emergence of female journalists. In fact, with the expansion of education for girls of the upper classes, especially from the Christian community, they began to form their organizations and publish their activities in their newspapers. While the organizations were based on humanistic and altruistic motives, pioneer women also had individual motivations “in order to use the new skills they have acquired, expose and refine them at the same time.”¹⁴

Hence the 1920s witnessed a proliferation of women’s organizations and magazines; *Minerva* (1917) founded by Marie Yenni, *al-Fatat* (1918) founded by Mohammad Al-Baqer, *Fata al-Watan* (1919) founded by Mariam A’Zammar, *al-Fajr* (1919) by Najla’ Abi Al-Lama’, etc.¹⁵ Women’s organizations crystallized in various forms: religious, national cultural, familial, and those who formed as a branch of men associations.¹⁶

A first generation of feminists: national independence and political rights for women

¹¹ Fawwaz Traboulsi, An Intelligent Man’s Guide to Modern Arab Feminism, *Al-Raida*, Volume XX, No. 100 Winter 2003, p. 16.

¹² Traboulsi, 2003, *op.cit.* ; Caroline Sukkar, *The Lebanese Council of Women: the issues of its protest movement (Al-Majlis Al-Nisa’i Al-Lubnani: Ishkaliyat Harakatihi Al-Matlabiah)*, Masters thesis, Lebanese University – Social Sciences Institute - Section 2, 2003, p. 50-51.

¹³ Sukkar, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Azza Charara Beydoun, *Nisa’ wa jam’iyyât lubnaniyyat bayna insâf al-thât wa khidmat al-ghayr (Women and associations)*, Beirut, Dar Annahar, 2002, p. 13.

¹⁵ Aida Al-Jawhari, *Ramziyat al-hijab mafahim wa dalalat (The symbolism of the veil, concepts and significations)*, Center for Arab unity studies, 2007.

¹⁶ Nahawand Al-Qadiry, “Sahafat al-nisa’ wa jam’yatihin: Wajhan li ‘omla wahida” (Lebanese women’s journalism and their organizations in the 1920s: the two side of the same coin), in *Al-Nisa’ al-‘arabiyat fil ‘ishrinat houdouran wa howiyatan (Arab Women in the 1920s Presence and Identity)*, Center for Arab unity studies, Bahithat, 2nd ed., Beirut, 2010, p. 82, 83.

The first generation of feminist organizations, after the independence of the Lebanese state, coalesced around the struggle for political rights of women. These feminists based their demands on their participation in the movement of national independence alongside men and on international law emerging in the same era. However sectarian chieftains of the newly independent political institutions had different priorities. In fact, the first electoral law passed in 1950 expressly deprived women of the right to vote and to be elected to parliament.¹⁷ The first demonstrations and the organization of coordination meetings began in this context.

This led to the union of feminist organizations in 1951. However, Lebanese women's movements were divided along sectarian lines between two main networks of Muslim and Christian organizations. The first branch was called *Jam'iyat al-tadamon al-Nisa'i* (Women Solidarity Association), headed by Laure Thabet, including Christian charitable women's organizations. The second, *Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-Loubnani* (The Lebanese Union of Women), founded in 1920, included Muslim women organizations and those who formed the branches of Arab nationalist and leftist political parties.¹⁸

The importance of the campaign for political rights was to be found in its socio-political impact. Thus the foundation of a union of women's organizations under the umbrella organization of the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW) was the fruit of the victory of 1952, when the demands for political rights were fulfilled.¹⁹ However, the campaign did not encourage women's organizations to create a feminist agenda and tended to benefit from the protection and encouragement from the *paterfamilias*. In fact, the efforts of Laure Moughayzel, when of the leaders of the suffragists, were encouraged, approved, and protected by the founding father of the *Kataeb* (Phalanges), Pierre Gemayel, who wanted to "modernize and westernize the woman and the country."²⁰ Moreover, the LCW fit the sectarian political system by alternating its leadership's affiliation between Christian and Muslim.

This is also a similar approach that was adopted within part of the "civil" organizations of the 1990s, studied by Karam Karam, to the extent that "the principle displayed in the objectives and purposes of the association is the absence of sectarian discrimination; the recruitment and organization of the group can function on logics of positive discrimination where categories of the fought classifications are used tacitly."²¹

Caroline Sukkar summarizes the characteristics of women's organizations after independence as non-radical, adopting an approach that does not connect the feminist cause to societal and structural issues. This elite had no interest in defending women belonging to lower economic

¹⁷ Iman Shamas Shoukeir, *Nisa' fi imra'a, sirat Laure Moughayzel* (women in one woman, the life of Laure Moughayzel) Annahar, Beirut, 2002, p. 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Sukkar, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²⁰ Shoukeir, 2002, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

²¹ Karam, 2006, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

classes, for example. Many member organizations of the LCW lacked representativeness and addressed the social problems with the sole objective of preserving the status quo.²²

Feminist discourse of this generation reflected the degree of overlap between national identity and female identity. In fact, the claim of political rights by the feminist movement was justified by recourse to women's participation in the battle for national independence. This confusion between female identity and national identity had been part of the discourse of political parties of the period, those on the left like those on the right.²³

The second feminist wave: the experience of the leftist collectives

The early 1960s reflected a change in the role of associations in Lebanon, in the context of transformations within the state and society during the "Chehabist era".²⁴ The reformist policies of Fouad Chehab²⁵ led to the emergence of new social actors.²⁶ The Lebanese government was trying to fulfill its social functions and found in the associations, especially those of women, a way to help solve its social dilemmas.

According to Karam Karam, "during the second period (1958-1975) several elements of articulation between the political and the associative spheres had crystallized, guided by a modernist and developmentalist political will."²⁷ It is worth noting that the reform project proposed by Chehab, following the report of the IRFED²⁸ mission, was in response to the political and socio-economic crisis that took a "turn of sectarian confrontation" in 1958.²⁹ Thus, some associations began to play a public role and work in the direction of developing the most disadvantaged areas.

In this context Fahmieh Charafeddine traces the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement in Lebanon in the late 1960s. This era was marked with the disappointment caused by the defeat in the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt.³⁰ This atmosphere turned the country into a

²² Sukkar, 2003, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²³ Fahmieh Charafeddine, *Al-haraka al-nisa'iyya fi Loubnan* (Women movement in Lebanon), ESCWA, 2006, p. 12.

²⁴ Beydoun, 2002, *op. cit.*, p. 14

²⁵ President of the Lebanese republic, elected in 1958, his mandate and his reform project were known as Chehabism.

²⁶ Beydoun, 2002, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

²⁷ Karam, 2006, *op.cit.*, p.53.

²⁸ "Besoins et possibilités de développement du Liban; étude préliminaire. Mission IRFED-Liban, 1960-1961," International Institute for Research and Training, Education Culture and development, Lebanese Ministry of Planning, Beirut, Helio Electronic Press, 1963 or 1964.

²⁹ Karam, 2006, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

³⁰ Charafeddine, 2006, *op. cit.*

laboratory of political movements; new schools of thought emerged within political parties and feminist organizations.³¹

Women's organizations of this period were factions of nationalist and leftist parties, for example *al-tajammou al-Nisa'i al-dimocrati al-lubnani* (Lebanese Democratic Gathering of Women - LDGW) founded in 1976 as a sister organization for *Munazamat al-'amal al-shuyu'i* (the Organization of Communist Action - OCA) and *al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-taqaddumi* (the Progressive Women's Union) founded in 1980, affiliated to the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Modernity was the first intellectual basis of the visions of these organizations, while their second cornerstone was national independence and regional development.

However, feminist movements of the second wave did not have an agenda independent of the political parties to which they are affiliated. Moreover, women's rights were not defended by specific public campaigns – “the victory of the feminist cause depended on the victory of the socialist cause”.³² Other interviewed activists spoke about a policy of containment and annexation practiced by the political parties towards women's committees; “[they] allowed us to form a committee for women but they controlled our work and monitored all our meetings”.³³

It seems that the separation of the LDGW from the OCA happened only on the organizational level. While organizational independence was supposed to meet specific needs of women, intellectually, however, LDGW maintained the same ideological structure of OCA.

The LDGW therefore failed to draw the outlines of its own ideology. In a context of war, this feminism prioritized humanitarian action to bring aid to victims of war. By aligning itself with OCA, LDGW and other feminists of this wave lost their ability to recruit women they claimed to represent, particularly those of the lower social classes. In fact, the common definition of social classes within the leftist circles of *al-haraka al-wataniya al-lubnaniya* (the Lebanese National Movement) was manipulated according to the interests of its various factions. This approach focused on the sect and not the relationship to the means of production, as in the Marxist definition. The left of this generation, including LDGW, failed to translate its secular ideals and the intellectual openness of its pioneers into political action. Moreover, their helped exacerbate communal tensions, through what some sociologists call the concept of “community class.”³⁴ This demonstrated a particular failure within the LDGW to reconcile between ideological

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³² Interview with Jihane on May 16th, 2013.

³³ Interview with Oraib, May 5th, 2013.

³⁴ On this subject; Samir Kassir, *La guerre du Liban : De la dissension nationale au conflit regional*, KARTHALA-CERMOC, 1994, p. 91. Fawwaz Traboulsi writes in the magazine of the OCA, *al-Hurriyah* on October 3rd, 1977, “(...) the confrontation of the religion of governors by the religion of the governed, the religion of those satiated by the religion of the hungry”, cited in Walid Daou, “The Trade Union and Workers Movement in Lebanon, a Story of Struggles and Victories”, *Majallat Al-Thawra al-Da'ima* (Permanent Revolution Journal), No. 3, March 2013, <http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/issue3/brief-history-oflabor-movement-lebanon> (last accessed June 15th, 2013).

determinants modeled by the OCA and its own discourse, specifically “inequality within the family, structured by the sectarian laws of personal status within the sectarian system.”³⁵

Several factors contributed to the passage from the nationalist feminism of the first wave to the leftist feminism of the second. The Chehabist period allowed the newly-formed associations to pick components of its reform plan and participate in governmental efforts. Moreover, the defeat in the 1967 war triggered a process of questioning of nationalist ideologies of the independence movements, which promoted the formation of new leftist collectives fed by an influx of unions and student activists. This wave of feminism adopted the discourse of the left and played a vital role in the new polarization in that direction. Leftist feminists of the second wave even had access to international networks of feminists of the second wave in the United States and France, through their writings, and benefited from funding by those networks. However, the onset of the civil war in Lebanon had a major impact on the evolution of feminist activism; humanitarian work became their first priority.

Feminist discourse of this period, nonetheless, did not change much compared to the wave that preceded it. It integrated female identity to national identity without real participation in the decision-making of political movements; feminist activists almost devoted the entirety of their efforts to aid and assist during the civil war. For Charafeddine, political parties managed to appropriate the work of social movements and those of women and made their priorities the priorities of feminists.

The third wave and the globalization of feminist politics

After the 1975-1990 Civil War in Lebanon, the main event for feminists was the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, and related Lebanese preparations. This period witnesses the formation of new organizations including *al-lajna al-ahlia limutaba'at qadaya al-mar'a* (the National Committee for the Follow up of Women's Issues - CFUWI) and the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW), which allowed a rejuvenation within the visions of the feminist movements, now modeled on the methodology of Beijing. A new jargon was born around the emergence of the “new” causes, such as “positive discrimination”, “gender based violence”, and “full citizenship”.

The Lebanese State, and as part of its obligations relating to the ratification of CEDAW, created *al-hay'a al-wataniya li-shou'oun al-mar'a al-lubnaniya* (the National Commission for Lebanese Women – NCLW) in 1996. In 1998, this commission became a national institution by Law No. 720. NCLW was able to implement two strategies, the first in 1997 and second in 2011, in partnership with feminist organizations of civil society. The last aimed to achieve full equality between men and women in all legislation in the areas of health and education, to fight poverty among women, strengthen the participation of women in the economic and political life, combat

³⁵ Interview with Jihane, *op.cit.*

violence against women (VAW), change social stereotypes, and strengthen national feminist work and partnership with civil society.

In fact, the specialization of feminist NGOs appears following to the institutionalization of certain programs run by the government. This “NGOization” of feminist movements affected the very structures of the groups, in practice, but also in the content of the claims, as indicated above. Thus, the structures of these new NGOs now met the requirements of international donors: initiatives turn into “projects”,³⁶ activists into “project officers” or employees.³⁷

Similarly, an important factor that accompanies this NGOization must be emphasized, the perpetual search for funds from donors. This funding, on which depends the survival of these new structures, helps to create dissension and rivalry within organizations and between them. The adoption of donor priorities launched NGOs into frantic competition and helped deflect their objectives.³⁸

This process was accompanied by a transformation in the feminist discourse, focused on rights and reform of existing laws. Some activists also described the transformation of the discourse from one on the “left” into one based on those specific causes and reforms (*tajzi’ al-qadaya*). Thus, the discourse of communist feminists of the 1970s was adapted to globalization.

The fourth wave of feminism: the rise of a New Leftist feminism

The fourth wave of feminism in Lebanon was born in an LGBT movement, created during the leftist mobilizations of the 2000s.³⁹ The activists of this wave of mobilization adopted a critical position in relation to existing feminist organizations, specifically on the totally overlooked issues related to sexual and bodily rights.

Women’s experience in *Helem* were consistent with that experienced in several LGBT movements around the world, specifically on the issue of organizational relationships between women and men in these movements. While *Helem* positioned itself in principle against the

³⁶ Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 843.

³⁷ Johanna Siméant, “Urgence et développement, professionnalisation et militantisme dans l’humanitaire”, *Mots*, n°65, 2001; Frédéric Sawicki, “Les temps de l’engagement. À propos de l’institutionnalisation d’une association de défense de l’environnement”, in Lagroye (Jacques) (dir.), *La politisation*, Paris, Belin, 2003.

³⁸ Géraldine Chatelard, “Constructing and deconstructing” the Iraq refugee crisis, ”paper presented at the conference of the International Association of Contemporary Iraqi Studies, SOAS, London ١٦, and ١٧ of July. ٢٠٠٨, ٢٠٠٨

³⁹ Ghassan Makarem, “The Story of Helem”, in *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol.7, n°3, Fall 2011, p. 102; and AbiYaghi, 2013, *op.cit.*

patriarchal system, gay and lesbian activism reproduced sexist logics.⁴⁰ Those patriarchal power relations led at the end of each episode of disputes to the secession of women.⁴¹

The withdrawal of women from Helem began with the creation of Helem Girls.⁴² The “girls” needed to get together and discuss their experiences and needs in an environment where they could feel safe. Their meetings were held outside the premises of Helem. The group even became independent in 2006, under the name of *Meem*, where politics and religion were forbidden from the discussions.⁴³ Meem members, following several episodes of “inevitable” political discussions, decided to create the “Feminist Collective” as an electronic platform to publish their opinions about the situation of women in Lebanon.

The birth of Nasawiya⁴⁴ came later in 2009, as a reconstruction of the Feminist Collective, which imploded as its structure failed to withstand existing political differences within the group. Nasawiya highlighted its uniqueness compared to the existing Lebanese feminist movement. Its activists emphasized their “intersectional” discourse for the liberation of women. For them, “women do not form a uniform biological identity, but, rather they are the result of the interaction of the different facets that make up the identity and in a specific context in which they live.”⁴⁵

Nasawiya crystallized around the so-called “identity politics”, and more specifically sexual identities, gay in this case. Despite a “radicalization” of their rhetoric and a new approach to female identity throughout the body, these organizations were not carriers of any political program. Like their predecessors, the new generation of feminists continued to operate in elite circles. In practice, the other societal oppression agents, such as social class, were neglected. The relationship to “politics” in Nasawiya was an experimental one, approaching the political sphere through experience and not through a predefined, clear, and immutable ideology. More precisely, the collective had been created around a lesbian identity and not as a result of an ideological differentiation from Helem.

Nasawiya identified itself as leftist, and could be considered as belonging to the new anti-war left and anti-neoliberal globalization movement, which distances itself from the traditional left and their feminists. However the collective could not emerge outside the frames of a clique of

⁴⁰ Abi Yaghi, 2013, *op.cit.*

⁴¹ Abi Yaghi, 2013, *op.cit.*; also see Anthony Rizk and Ghassan Makarem, “Masculinity-under-threat”: Sexual Rights Organizations and the Masculinist State in Lebanon”, *Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support*, 2015.

⁴² Interview with Khoulood, Nasawiya activist, on August 26th, 2013.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Literally “feminism”.

⁴⁵ Interview with Khoulood, *op.cit.* This is a reminder of the work of Judith Butler, who criticizes the assumptions made by feminist movements that there is a female identity that needs to be represented in the political sphere. For Butler, “women” is a complex category of interactions with race, class, sexuality and other factors that make up the identity.

activists who talk alike,⁴⁶ dress alike, and have a similar lifestyle.⁴⁷ While the politicization of Nasawiya happened *a posteriori*, its activism and organization was not an outcome of its vision, which probably was the main cause of the repetitive breakup of the group. This was also an indication of a deficit in Nasawiya's representation of women, not in the numbers of adherent or sympathizers of the group, but in the concealment of the various components of women identities in the Lebanese context, in specific women from poorer social classes who were marginalized within the group.⁴⁸

This wave was triggered by the formation of the LGBT awareness, which was not present in previous generations of feminists. It was a radicalization that borrowed heavily from the standards and norms of donors, without real impact on the patriarchal structures of local society. Hence, Nasawiya was primarily created around an “identity”⁴⁹ issue in a “depoliticized” manner, to the extent that this group failed to translate its scattered claims into a theoretical framework or a common program. In practice, it was reflected by an inability to mobilize around “one” cause; the group remained confined in a series of scattered initiatives, which always led to organizational schisms, until the implosion of the collective, once again, in 2012.⁵⁰

2. Distancing from State feminism: Dynamism and Diversity of Feminist Positions in Lebanon

During the years of the Civil War, feminist groups acted as representatives of women's rights due of the collapse of state institutions. As explained above, by the 1980s, leftist and nationalist feminists were central in activist circles. These organizations played a decisive role in the changes undergone by the movement and repositioning towards the “system”.

Framing of Legislative Reform within the Lebanese Reservations on CEDAW

Debates about public policy towards women reduced feminist organizations into a purely advisory role. This was largely accompanied by the process of institutionalization of CEDAW, encouraged by the Lebanese state. Feminists were central to the preparations for the Beijing Summit.

Activists who traditionally put into practice the traditions of solidarity and sharing of experiences of violence had anticipated “unknowingly” this process of reorganization of the Lebanese

⁴⁶ Most of the meetings and discussions observed were conducted in English.

⁴⁷ Similar dynamics and trends were noted in other activists groups in the early years 2000 notably within the alternative globalization milieu. See Abi Yaghi, 2013, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Taylor Verta; Whittier Nancy, “Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization” Morris Aldon D. (Ed); Mueller Carol McClurg (Ed), *Frontiers in social movement theory*, New Haven, CT, US: Yale University Press, 1992, pp. 104-129.

⁵⁰ Field observations; also see Farfahinne Blog, “Feminism and self-criticism: notes from my personal experience,” September, 2014, available online at: <http://farfahinne.blogspot.com/2014/09/feminism-and-self-criticism-notes-from.html> [last accessed January 12th, 2015].

feminist space. In fact, the Beijing Conference accelerated the legitimization of new issues of struggle and helped to put new themes, such as domestic violence, on the agenda, which were previously not taken into account by “official feminism”. During the Beijing Conference, signs of divisions became apparent between feminists who produced knowledge about the existence of such violence and other feminists, who, from their academic position, “denied its existence.”⁵¹

However, in the wake of the conference, Lebanese feminist organizations would gradually adopt new modes of action, more targeted and specialized and conforming to the language of donors. The implementation of CEDAW further accelerated a process of NGOization of feminist movements, accompanying the institutionalization of state feminism and breaking, in part, with the legacy of feminist movements of previous decades. This process included, among others, the creation by the Lebanese state of a National Commission on issues around gender, according to the CEDAW guidelines, which provide for the formation of a non-governmental committee affiliated to the National Commission and acting as the supervisory body.

The governmental commission was created with a lack of representation from civil society, which claimed its place in terms of “democratic decision” that existed within the movement. The atmosphere of cooperation between government efforts and those of civil society within the preparations of the Beijing Conference resulted in the exclusion of feminist organizations. In 1998, the non-governmental committee eventually separated from the National Commission, deciding to form an independent organization following disagreements with the administrative body.⁵² These examples illustrate the political negotiations between the feminist groups and the state, on the one hand, and the rules of the game, which the Lebanese government sought to impose through its reservations on CEDAW, on the other.

The government’s rejection of certain articles of CEDAW⁵³ has been a significant patriarchal resistance to reform at the heart of the Lebanese state institutions, which targeted sectarian structures of the family, the hypersexualization of the female body, and women’s practice of their rights as citizens. The intervention of the Director General of the Ministry of Justice Wajih Khater (1995) on the text of the Treaty are particularly eloquent:

“The principle on which the treaty was based is the principle of absolute equality between the woman and the man, without any consideration of her biological and physiological condition and her feminine specificity as wife and mother. This concentration is devoted to a Western cultural reality, not accepted by the Eastern manners related to civilizations and religions that differentiate between the man and the woman, with full preservation of the woman’s dignity and the abolition of injustice towards her [...] Ultimately, the

⁵¹ Interview with Asia on September 5th, 2013.

⁵² Interview with Ferial on May 21st, 2013.

⁵³ The Lebanese reservations to CEDAW include Article 9, on equality in the nationality law, and Article 16 on equality in family laws.

Lebanese government rejects the principle of equality [...] in the western manner that contradicts the principles of Islam and Christianity and rooted Eastern traditions.”⁵⁴

Simultaneously, with this dual process of professionalization and institutionalization, feminists were able to strengthen their role as experts, widely integrating new trends in the global discourse around gender equality, such as the comprehensive approach to the problem of violence against women. This change appeared to be a direct response to the resistance of the Lebanese state, in order to encourage it to withdraw its reservations to CEDAW. However, this resistance was not manifested only by the state, it was also reflected inside the Lebanese feminist space between organizations defending a radical perspective to those who claim more a record of expertise.

Beyond the debates, this process was also responsible for the emergence of new feminist organizations, such like LECORVAW, *al-lajna al-ahliya*, and, at later stages Kafa, Abaad, etc. Similarly, it required from some partisan structures to reposition themselves in relation to new causes of the 1990s: the issue of “gender” was by then largely integrated into the institutional and partisan agenda.

In the Lebanese context of the 2000s, the redeployment of “feminist” issues occurred on three principal levels; professionalization, supporting the representation of feminist causes, and the multiplicity of positions with respect to institutional frameworks.

Professionalism had been the source of multiple tensions inside the movement. However, it was necessary, to the extent that it allowed the groups to adapt and contextualize the new paradigms adopted by CEDAW. The postwar period saw an abundance of funding, which supported the creation of new organizations, as well as the “restructuring” of older feminist associations. For example, the LDWG implemented an external evaluation of its structures to adapt them to the needs of international mechanisms. The paradigm shift caused by CEDAW contributed to some political autonomy from partisan structures. To illustrate this, the process was created by the conflicts within the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), following the disintegration of the OCA and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This new feminist leadership created its new organizations, agendas, and networks; it chose the March of Women (MoW) as a new framework for mobilization, action and advocacy. However, on the eve of the MoW, some of the organizations withdrew from the demonstration because the list of demands included enacting a civil personal status law.

These divisions reflected the multiple positions feminists took towards the “system” and recalled the limits imposed by the state on the application of CEDAW. This patriarchal record, dominant in the majority of Lebanese political actors and institutions, was further verified in 2014, with the

⁵⁴ Hurriyat Khassa (Personal Freedoms), *Al-Karama al-insaniyah fi qanun al-'uqubat* (Human Dignity in the Penal Code), Beirut, Sader Press, 2003.

partial adoption of the law on domestic violence. Although supposed to protect women from domestic violence, it was issued as a law to protect the family, maintaining women's status as dependent on the family structure. The Lebanese Legislature introduced concepts borrowed from religious institutions to the text, legalizing marital rape under the pretext of “conjugal rights”.

As the limitations imposed by the state on the CEDAW approach significantly impeded legislative reform, the advocacy process for the protection of women against domestic violence was no less interesting, becoming a major political issue within the associative sector, but also on the institutional level.

Mirroring Society to Deconstruct Patriarchal Norms?

The movement around VAW, which began in 2000, crystallized in 2007 by the production of a draft law by Kafa. It was endorsed by a new coalition of feminist organizations, the National Alliance to Legislate the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence. The campaign succeeded, in 2014, to mobilize sections of society beyond the traditional circles of activists and created pressure for the law's adoption by the parliament. Around 5,000 people joined the March 8, 2014 march in Beirut to support the new bill, although it was adopted in a very patriarchal version on April 1, 2014.

To illustrate the different approaches to VAW and consequently the distance from patriarchy, two examples of mobilization will be considered here. The *Nu'min* (We Believe) campaign organized by Abaad and *Hone rujoultak? Fattish 'an insanitak* (“Have you found your masculinity? Then seek thy humanity”) coordinated by Kafa, on the occasion of “16 days of activism against violence against women” in 2012. Abaad launched a campaign broadcasting a message from the heads of religious sects, preaching to men to refrain from violence as a hated practice by religious texts. Abaad explained the objectives of the campaign by stating that “the approach we use is not simplistic toward religion, we are trying to negotiate with these institutions, and there are differences of opinion inside them we had to approach them in a non-threatening manner.”⁵⁵ By not directly “threatening” the patriarchal institution, *Abaad* enshrined the power of religious leaders in explaining the sacred texts, and thus set the standard for control over society.

On the other hand, Kafa chose to introduce questions about the dominant forms of masculinity and sexist behavior by suggesting to men to build alternative identities that do not respond to the violent and oppressive model. In this perspective, Kafa launched an advertising campaign mirroring sexist behavior related to violence, to highlight male prerequisites and try to put them under the test in order to change them. In the same campaign, Kafa published testimonials written by men who think and live their masculinities by resisting patriarchy in public spaces but also within private and intimate relationships, in their daily life.

⁵⁵ Interview with Sumaya on August 21st, 2013.

In Kafa's campaign the male speaks to embody the "resistant masculinities" to patriarchy, unlike the approach of Abaad, which contributes, for many observers, to reinforce the power of religious leaders, the guardians of sectarian family laws in the Lebanese context. These two approaches are opposed in their treatment of the standard: one attempts to deconstruct the hegemonic model of masculinity, the other strengthens the place of religious power in the determination of the standard, and thus protecting the status quo.

The distance of feminisms from Lebanese patriarchy varies between pragmatic and revolutionary approaches and among organizations, and sometimes within the same organization. Kafa, shows a dynamism in its position in relation to state institutions, combining lobbying against legislative and executive institutions and radical challenge to the patriarchal norm. Other organizations have continued to favor national causes, adopting a holistic approach to social change, but this time around the claim of a "place" in the institutions, in particular calling for parliamentary and administrative quotas for women. Forms of institutional cooptation also appear in the field of women's NGOs, responding to donor projects, positioning themselves as "service providers" without really protesting the status quo.

Kafa succeeded in mobilizing citizens to the demonstration on March 8th, 2014, and in rendering VAW into an issue of public debate, when women victims of domestic violence revealed their "naked" identity in the public sphere encouraged by a wide media coverage. In Kafa's perspective, the bodies and stories of women victims of domestic violence voiced in the public space, will contribute to deconstruct this social phenomenon as a stigma, and put it forward as a violation of rights. While these women used to be blamed and encouraged to endure violence in silence, the march showed them in their oppressed essence to claim their rights within the sectarian family structure in place. While this new protest strategy (which incorporates the voices of those who resist the "system") had mixed results, it requires of feminist organizations to explore new modes of social protest outside the legislative reform framed by the state.

An Intifada of Feminism in the Arab Spring?

A new feminist movement is campaigning in the context of the Arab Spring, for "freedom, independence, and security." In response to the question of the link between gender issues and revolution, three women launched *intifadat al-mar'a fi al-'alam al-'arabi* (The Uprising of Women in the Arab World) in October 2011. The first action on Facebook attracted thousands of entries; the page collected more than 100,000 supporters ("likers"). It was moderated (2012-2013) by a dozen of volunteer women. The *Intifada* group highlighted discrimination against women in the Arab world on all levels (social, economic, political, legal...) and the fact that women in the region share many struggles. Its objective was to reopen the debate on the situation of women who have suffered many backlashes against their rights after the revolts in the Arab countries. The collective made use of social media networks, as well as being inspired by a more classic repertoire of contention, organizing sit-ins and writing press releases. The content of the responses received by the campaign was no less interesting; in particular, themes relating to the question of the body sparked heated debates. The photo of Dana Bakdounes, an activist of the Syrian revolution, said: "I am with the uprising of women in the Arab world, because for 20

years I was not allowed to feel the wind blowing inside my hair and on my body.” Bakdounes’ post caused the page to be blocked for several days.

Feminist campaigns of the “Arab Spring” were focused primarily on issues related to the body and the need of Arab women to write their stories and History with a capital “H”. The proliferation of initiatives promoted the formation of new organizations such as the aforementioned *Intifada*, *Ishtar*,⁵⁶ *OpAntiSH*,⁵⁷ and *Sawt al-Niswa* (which had broken off from *Nasawiya*).

This new approach is characterized by opposition to holistic approaches, wanting to document the invisible stories of women, written by themselves, as illustrated by the mentioned examples. The emergence of issues related to bodily rights was symbolized by the photo of the Egyptian Magda Alia al-Mahdy posing nude for the camera to protest sexual violence in Egypt in late 2011. This move was much criticized by the Liberals before the Islamists. Freedom of the body appeared as the added value of the struggles taking place in the Arab revolt, including those of its women. It constitutes a late claim of a *habeas corpus*⁵⁸ for women who express their opinions in public spheres and suffer its physical consequences.

The late formation of *habeas corpus* could be explained by a perception of the imminent danger of Islamism, especially those who aspire to the consolidation of power. The context of post-colonial Arab states, wanting to distance themselves from Western standards, but at the same time seeking to build societies on the values of secular Arab nationalism, socialism, and state Islamism, the seculars practiced containment policies and annexation of the bodies of women and their freedoms. This can be particularly interesting for further research.

Conclusion

The present research paper attempts to account for the ideological and sociological evolution of feminist mobilization in Lebanon.

The first wave, which was formed within the Republic, was born of women from the Lebanese bourgeoisie, with a high level of education. The main slogan of their struggle was the end of colonialism. In this nationalist perspective, they claimed the right to vote and participate in political life. These Lebanese pioneers of feminism were generally quite far from the concerns of the working classes. Two main organizations were present at the time, marrying a sectarian division. It was only after the various demonstrations against the first electoral law of 1951 that denied women’s participation in political life that these two organizations merged under the

⁵⁶ <http://3ashtar.com/home>

⁵⁷ Operation Anti Sexual Harassment <https://www.facebook.com/opantish/info>

⁵⁸ Geneviève Fraisse, “L’HABEAS CORPUS des femmes : une double révolution ?”, February 16th, 2014, <http://feministesentousgenres.blogs.nouvelobs.com/archive/2014/02/16/l-habeas-corpus-des-femmes-une-double-revolution-par-genevie-522793.html> [last accessed on May 15th, 2014].

single banner of the Lebanese Council of Women. However, the approach of the new council had not intended to upset the religious status quo. Indeed, the political action of women of that generation received the blessing of sectarian political leaders, taking place under their supervision. In short, a “male feminism” dominated by sectarian leaders, and relatively disconnected from the popular bases.

The period following the disintegration of nationalism in Arab countries and their development projects reflected the transition from a nationalist feminism to a leftist one. The second wave emerged especially within political parties. Women organizations appeared only as appendages of partisan organizations, much like youth organizations. The cause of women was secondary, fading behind the cause of national liberation. Feminists of this generation were controlled and monitored by their male counterparts at the head of parties. After the defeat of 1967 and the questioning of dominant ideologies (Arab Nasserite nationalism, Baathist, pro-Palestinian and other), these feminists had access to the literature of feminist movements in Europe and the United States, reinforcing a certain intellectual and academic elitism, disconnected of the fate of Lebanese women, especially those in the poorest regions (Bekaa, Akkar, the South, etc.). The lack of political discourse crystallized with the beginning of the Civil War and the transformation of the work of women into humanitarian efforts without a real protest against warlords.

The third wave was born in the early 1990s, prior to the preparations for the Beijing conference. This period favored a more advanced ‘NGOization’ of feminist associations. Priorities were thus set by donors; rivalries and competition created new schisms. The elitism that characterizes the history of feminism in Lebanon was also present in this generation of experts who gained knowledge of a specific vocabulary.

The fourth wave was born around an anti-imperialist movement, which resulted in the formation of Helem (LGBT movement). It stemmed from a perception of women as the result of a social construction by the oppression of women by patriarchy and religious system. The fourth wave focused on lesbian identity of women from middle and upper classes who have access to Beirut private education (graduates of major universities such as the AUB, USJ, or LAU), led to the creation of Nasawiya. Like their predecessors, the new generation of feminists continued to operate in elite circles.

Is it therefore possible to speak of the failure of feminist utopia in Lebanon? It would be simplistic to deduce this conclusion from the history of the formation of feminist organizations. Certainly lobbying strategies with legislative, administrative, and judicial institutions are confined by the Lebanese state’s reservations to CEDAW. Reservations that affect the essence of feminine existence: the right of women to control their own bodies. However, the impact of such strategies sparked an unprecedented mobilization in 2014 against the bill on domestic violence. Leadership of associations like Kafa promoted a discourse by women victims of domestic violence for the first time in the Lebanese public space, accompanied by a strong media campaign, which allowed the unveiling of victims to the general public. This transformation of the Lebanese feminist mobilization was partly induced by the rise of social movements

throughout the Arab region and the proliferation of initiatives to claim the body and its everyday history, forming a *habeas corpus* within the “Arab spring”.

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