Resistance, Gender, and Identity Politics: A Conversation with Rasha Younes

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Abstract

This interview highlights the complexities of gender through careful attention to collective resistance and uprising. It discusses the video documentary “If Not Now, When?” with Rasha Younes.

Keywords: Lebanon, Gender, Identity Politics, Resistance, Feminism

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The opening seconds of the trailer for “If Not Now, When?” a video documentary about the experiences of trans and queer women during the October 2019 social movement, begins with Rana, one of the video’s subjects, reflecting on the reactions of some protesters to calls to denounce homophobia: “Some people say this issue has nothing to do with the revolution, why bring up homophobia in the revolution?” “No,” responds Rana, “there’s space for everything […] If we don’t make our voices heard now, we won’t be able to speak up later.”[1] This “space for everything,” according to Rasha Younes, the creative mind behind the project and an LGBT Rights Researcher for the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch, and these “specific moments in time” where you can see, in real time, a collective group of people merging and establishing connections across identity lines, is a the heart of [Younes’] own work as a feminist activist and, specifically, the pitfalls of identity politics that commonly plagues international rights movements.[2]

“It wasn’t that queers [in this mobilization] were saying “We are here, we are queer, look at us!”[…] It wasn’t that queers are finally being visible, because they have been visible in this country for the longest time. [I]t was more this newfound, collective consciousness […] where the realities of different groups are finally fused together in a very, very organic way, and how that became part and parcel of the protests, as opposed to saying ‘This is a protest for women’s rights’ or ‘This is a projects for LGBT right.’ [This] is a departure from identity politics in its rawest state, and that’s what I wanted to show. To mainstream these ideas that identities, LGBT identities, are not separated from all these other systems of oppression that exist.”

Focusing on the spatial politics of resistance, existence, and survival in Lebanon, Younes’ work has always foregrounded material reality, taking seriously Marxist feminist calls for a political economy framework that conceptualizes subjectivity as a product of, and a response to the various social, economic, political, and gendered pressures structuring hegemonic life. In Lebanon, this means a special focus on the political economy of sectarianism, and how sectarianism has structured access not

only to public spaces, but to each other.

"[The video project] is not about queers in Lebanon existing in the street and "coming out" and dressing the way that they want to dress out in the street. This is absolutely not it. This is about the privatization of public space; this is about spatial politics, and the ways that certain bodies exist in this politics. This is about an assertion of resistance from a specific reality for individuals not only based on their queerness or their gender identity, but also based on their neighborhood, their sect, [and] their political-economic status […] I'm saying there was a specific joining of realities that did not exist in Lebanon because of sectarianism, because of the spatial politics of sectarianism, the neighborhoods and lack of public space […] So when people who have never met [because of these spatial politics] finally meet in the streets, it's a revolution, it's a revolutionary moment for the country. So that is what I was trying to document, is that time and space, that is very temporal and very euphoric, that needs to be archived [because of] the way that is challenged all of the systems [of oppression] that we understood, both about the identity politics of what it means to be queer or trans in this country, but also on special politics and economies."

Where "If Not Now, When?" documents the extraordinary moments of the October 2019 movement, Younes' work more broadly focuses on the political economy of resistance, in contradistinction to the dominant conceptualization of resistance as "oppositional," "counter-hegemonic," and exceptional. Instead of searching for these highly-visible moments of resistance, Younes' work – both as an activist and through their work at HRW – focuses on "what resistance means within a real-life framework, not a theoretical framework, and within a specific context."

"So what resistance means in Lebanon, and how it's practiced [...] My intervention [to normative definitions of resistance] – specifically in Lebanon, where sectarianism is not only a dominant hegemony based on identity, [but] is also very much a political economy system of control – [is that] to resist that system is to detach from the political economy of sectarianism which is almost impossible, in the way that sectarianism infiltrates itself in every aspect of life and every aspect of politics and every aspect of identity […] In order for real resistance to take place, or in order for real opposition to take place, there has to be an alternative [political] economy, there has to be a way in which people's livelihoods do not need to depend on sectarianism in order to survive. And that's something that is still missing […] It's on the ground in this context, what does it mean to separate from sectarian economy? How do we build solidarity economies and alternative economies that are sustainable within this ideological framework that we are trying to create?"

This does not detract from the "everyday resistance [that] is practiced here in Lebanon," including "creative or innovative ideas of 'how do I get electricity to my house,' or the 'gift economy' between neighbors." However, sectarianism is both challenged and supported by these resistances: "sectarianism cannot survive without this, the informal cracks that feed back into the structure, strengthening [it]."

"It's a cyclical loop, and I think approaching it from a critical lens theoretically is very important, but also how to accomplish [resistance] on the ground has to be very much grassroots, and has to be very much within these neighborhoods, and within these families […] you can't detach that from the reality."

“An alternative system of resistance and existence”: Feminism in Lebanon

Rasha Younes’ feminist politics is rooted in their lived experience.

“Growing up in Lebanon – I don’t want to go into the identity politics of that – but my positionality and how I had to navigate different systems of oppression is what got me to my interest in this specific work […]I think it was a combination [of moments in my life] of raw interest, lived experience, and then a really deep interest in knowledge production.”

As an anthropologist by training and a human rights researcher, Younes similarly grounds feminism and feminist politics based on material reality and context.

“I think feminism as a political framework is very much grounded in power, [and] power relations, and that applies to so many different contexts based on power relations between specific individuals and their positionality in a given context. So it’s not necessarily a universal claim that I am trying to make, but in that sense, I do think [feminism] is very much grounded in a political economy within which power is challenged, and individual livelihood and preservation is elevated.”

Challenging power relations, for Younes, does not necessarily mean equality. In fact, the focus on equality alone can actually detract from the deeper and more radical social justice roots of feminism. Power relations challenge the foundations of the type of “social justice” used within the human rights framework, which posits that “‘all humans are equal’: absolutely not true […] because of the systems of power relations that exist […] this definition [of social justice] is pretty contrived, as opposed to how it could be defined by specific collectives based on their actual needs and led by them, as opposed to top-down [decision-making].” It is here that grassroots feminism in Lebanon can make a strong contribution:

“[F]eminist collectives and individuals in this country and women in general lead this entire [social justice] movement, and are very much at the forefront of change […] I think it’s very much a balancing of power, and a challenge of a system of oppression that has subjugated specific bodies based on their intersectional position in society, and in the economy. So for me, feminism is challenging those systems of oppressions, whether they be on the micro-level of your interaction with a father, or with a taxi driver, or with a matriarch, or your interaction with a nation, or your interaction with global politics […] [Feminism is] very much based on power relations and challenging systems of oppression and subjugation based on an intersectional web of contextual positionality.”

Living in Lebanon as a feminist, and doing feminist work, however, remains a challenge:

“But [feminist work] is also this kind of burden of asking permission from multiple entities – asking permission from yourself, asking permission from your family, asking permission from the state, asking permission even from fellow “feminists” to exert any type of presence within this country; [it is] exhausting. [A]nd I think the work of self-preserving and working inside, outside, and around a system of oppression is very, very valuable, and I think that’s where we need to depart from […] I do think that most of the invisible work that is done politically in this country is by women, and all grassroots initiatives including the revolution, including any initiative that you see in this country that is in any

sense nuanced, neighborhood work, even NGO work, is very much women-led. At the same time, this doesn't translate into systems of power."

Gender and Identity Politics in Lebanon

"I think the idea of identity politics very much emerged from a need to 'protect' certain identities, which also comes from the rise of humanitarianism and international mechanism to protect specific vulnerable populations, which also arises from the capitalist economy within which there's a monopolization of […] resources. So in that sense, I think identity politics emerged as a well-intentioned, 'we need to pay attention to different identities, and how their needs and vulnerabilities differ.'"

Identity politics can however obscure the larger context within which subjectivities are formed, resulting in a "very superficial" understanding of the relationship between identity and broader systems of power: "looking at populations not from this identity lens, but from their position within society and within an economic system." Therefore, according to Younes, a truly feminist position would work to "detach gender and sexuality from this identity politics of 'you belong to a certain gender,' or 'you belong to a certain sexual orientation'" with the aim to "understand that there's a system of power around gender, and there are gender inequalities in this world that are also tied to superstructures like capitalism, among others."

"This is the approach we take in our work [at Human Rights Watch, HRW hereafter], and I very much try to broach on that within the organization, specifically on class power, in the sense that when you talk about LGBTQ populations and LGBTQ people, you cannot ever detach that from class power, especially in Lebanon, because social status and connections is what shapes your life. So for example, if you're a trans woman who has a PhD from Paris and is living in her parents' home, you're probably going to be less susceptible to these systems of oppression and the kinds of daily vulnerabilities than a trans woman who has never worked, and was kicked out of her home, and has never had access to employment, and is shamed by security forces and toxic masculinity […] So we need to focus on how LGBTQ people are specifically affected, but not necessarily just as queer or trans people: also as poor queer and trans people, or queer and trans people who already have compromised health."

Younes' nuanced reflections about identity politics equally apply to HRW itself, and the broader sector of human rights work. While identity politics can be superficial and limiting, it is often "digestible for an audience" that has access to the resources which might then be redistributed to help vulnerable and marginalized communities: "Identity politics [brings] the world's attention to a specific issue where resources are needed." Without denying the existence of capitalist and elitist tendencies among international human rights frameworks, Younes notes that we must also pay careful attention to what such global activism can help us to achieve in relation to the "very real consequences" of macro political-economic systems have "on specific bodies and individuals" the world over, and especially in Lebanon. But, rather than depending on a universal claim about "life, identity, or justice:"

"[W]e need to strive for some kind of actualization of social justice, but what that means needs to depart from an idea of bodily autonomy and basically, the right to bodily autonomy […] it needs to primarily depart from [a] community's ability to navigate space and services and everything in a safe way, and in a way that preserves their bodily autonomy, and in a way that they deem is empowering for

them […] to have the basic needs of every individual met without a struggle for survival […] the nuance of that needs to come from a certain context, and not from a global understanding of social justice, or a global understanding of humanitarianism, because that's precisely where we go wrong every time."

Toeing the line – between theory and practice, between advocacy and research, and between lived realities and universal conceptualizations of social justice – has become part and parcel of Rasha Younes' work as both a researcher and an activist. Maintaining the "tension between this critique" of the framework of international human rights with the "need to collaborate and work within these mechanisms in order to accomplish real, tangible change on whatever micro scale that we can accomplish is very important," notes Younes, and has made their work an honest reflection of the everyday realities of life in Lebanon as part of the LGBTQ community.

[1] Younes, R. and Bailly, A. (2020). "'If Not Now, When?' Queer and Trans People Reclaim Their Power." *Human Rights Watch*. Accessed August 3, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power.

[2] This article is based on an interview by the author with Rasha Younes, Beirut, July 30, 2020.