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After the Civil War: Activists and Feminists in the 1990s

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Over the many war years, huddling with family and neighbors in the fear and discomfort of our underground shelter in Ras Beirut, I perceived a subtle shift in power relationships between husbands and wives.

Men seemed to be losing power: they sometimes broke down in the shelter while their women comforted and calmed them. Separated from their previous links with banks, lawyers, the state and its institutions, they found themselves in a new domestic space, about which they knew nothing. Husbands became more dependent on their wives, and thus women became stronger. More important, they became aware of their growing strength.

Outside the shelter, many women were left in charge of their households when their husbands either left the country to find employment abroad, or were killed or disappeared. These women had not only to overcome huge economic difficulties, but had also to make heroic efforts to ensure their children's – and often their own parents' -- safety and well-being. The more they had to take charge, and the wider their growing circle of responsibilities, the stronger they became. As women were far less likely than men to be aggressed or kidnapped at roadblocks, they developed an ability to speak up in dangerous moments, whereas before they had remained silent and unheard.

Eventually, the war ended, and was replaced by a political struggle that goes on to this day. The state, though still in tatters, was trying to re-establish its patriarchal authority. I wondered if women, with their newfound confidence, would demand a higher rank for themselves in the society being re-formed than they had previously held.

I had already been for many years a passionate feminist, but had been too busy during the war with my teaching and family duties to be involved in civil

society. Now I began to seek out women's groups, and enthusiastically attended their meetings.

In June 1995, a remarkable event took place. An Arab "Women's Court" was held at the elegant seafront Carlton Hotel. The judges, who sat on a raised dais, were all well-known women lawyers. The crowded audience was also made up almost entirely of women, who sat, mesmerized, as they listened to the proceedings. One by one, women from around the region stood in front of the court, and told of their abuse at the hands of their husbands, families or political authorities. This was a strictly feminine affair, and female solidarity was palpable as collective gasps followed some of the most egregious stories.

A young Mauritanian woman told how she had been genitally mutilated at the age of six, and then at ten sent off to a special "farm" with other girls where they had been fattened up – she used the word *ta'leef* (تعليف), as though she were a sheep being prepared for slaughter. She was force-fed until at the age of twelve she was presented to an elderly man as his beautiful, fat bride. An Egyptian reporter told of an elderly rural woman, who, throughout her long married life, had been regularly whipped by her husband. Every night he would climb on a chair to bring the whip down from the top of a high cupboard. One night as he climbed on to his chair, she pulled it out from under him and beat him to death. She was now serving a life sentence.

One story that particularly resonated with me was told by a young Palestinian woman who lived with her husband and his mother. Acting together, they continuously tormented her with cruel put-downs, mocked her cooking, and repeatedly called her a donkey (حمارة). Though some laughed, I saw her tears and felt her deep anger and pain. A Sudanese woman who had been incarcerated for her political activities recounted the cruel conditions of prison life, among which was the lack of prepared sanitary napkins. The prisoners

had to rip up their clothes to make pads, which were then washed and reused and passed from one woman to another.

The three-day affair left me shattered by the depth of the suffering, and I expected a political storm to arise. But to my surprise and deep disappointment, the women's court left no trace on the public record, and especially not on the public discourse. Nor did I hear anything about it in any of the women's meetings that I attended. Why, I obsessed, did nothing happen after we all went home?

Fascinated by this question, I continued to seek out women's gatherings, hoping to find one that suited me. The group whose meetings I attended most consistently was The League for Lebanese Women's Rights (لجنة حقوق المرأة اللبنانية) headed by the charismatic Linda Matar. Mrs. Matar came to the women's movement not from reading feminist texts, but through her lived experience as a young factory worker. The primary target of her group was to change the laws unfair to women.

After attending many meetings, there seemed to me in this target something lacking. I became convinced that it could not be achieved without a transformative change in the lives of women, and for that we needed a far more complex outlook, one immersed in culture, language, history.

I was once called upon to join a demonstration in front of the Parliament building. That day the MPs were to debate changes to the labor laws proposed by our group. I went downtown to join, but found that, instead of the big crowd that I had expected, there were only a handful of dedicated activists present, and not a single worker. Where, I asked myself, were the factory and agricultural workers, the domestic workers, the crowds of women unjustly treated not only by the law, but by society at large?

I assumed that they had been summoned to join the demonstration, and were afraid to attend for fear of losing their jobs. But is that not a necessary price to pay for advancement, and was it not one that has been paid many times before? Weren't the women factory workers and members of the suffragette movement in early 20th century England and the US often beaten and even jailed? Look at what the women strikers in Bangladesh today have risked to protest their dire situation in the clothing factories, which are fire traps. Look at the long history of women's protests in Ireland for more enlightened abortion laws. Look at how Palestinian women – and girls -- have defied the vicious occupation? Have these women and so many others like them not taken huge risks?

I raised these questions at the next meeting. My colleagues listened politely, but the matter went no further. I was disappointed in this reaction and felt that, though fighting against unfair laws was a crucial aspect of making life better for women, a primary aim should be to create a mass movement which no one could ignore, and without which no serious change could be accomplished.

I began to feel – and later write about – a gap, or even an estrangement, between feminists and activists. Feminism, by its very nature, is analytical, and studies the world, its power structures, culture and society with a sharply critical eye. Activists on the other hand, have practical goals: they tend to keep good relations with those in power, not because they like or approve of them, but because they believe this approach could facilitate the achievement of their goals. If both groups interacted directly, refining their ideas together, they could wield formidable power.

Years after the demonstration described above, I joined a group of women from various associations, including The League for Lebanese Women's Rights, which had come together to create a network of NGOs with the aim of strengthening women's positions by unifying the ranks and the demands. Those who attended the meetings came together as individuals, not necessarily as formal representatives of the groups to which they belonged.

The idea was to come up with a list of common demands. This proved easier said than done, as the different groups, and even individuals within each group, held very different, and sometimes quite contradictory, opinions on a variety of issues. Instead of joining forces and refining some of their differences, there grew a divisive rivalry between the attendees. While there were ideological differences between those present, there were also clear personality clashes.

For example, when the question of rape came up, some of us wished to have marital rape put on the agenda. We were immediately slapped down by some of the conservative women for considering that a legally married man could be accused of raping his own wife!

Another subject that we differed on had to do with the demand that women married to foreigners should be allowed to pass on their citizenship to their husbands and children. Most of the group wanted to limit this right to the children. When some of us insisted that the foreign husband be included the response was that "they" – i.e. the Parliament – would never "give us" such a gift. I was furious at the idea that we should voluntarily lower the bar of our demands to make them more palatable to the patriarchal establishment, or to consider that rights should be regarded as gifts to be bestowed on us, if we behaved ourselves. To this day, the nationality law has not changed.

I joined several other women's organizations ready to do feminist battle. One is the Lebanese Association for Women Researchers, تجمع الباحثات اللبنانيات, begun informally during the war as a forum for women professors on both sides of the green line to meet and discuss their work. It was formalized by the Ministry of the Interior in 1992.

The primary function of this organization is to benefit women scholars by providing a space for their intellectual production and exchange. Members read and comment on each other's work, and join together in research projects. The group has produced many books, and organized several major international conferences. But some members of the Association insist that we should not be considered a feminist organization, though most of us are indeed self-proclaimed feminists, and most of the work we do centers on women.

I have never understood why many women seem hostile to feminism.

The 1990s was a period of intense political and military struggle. Repeated Israeli attacks on Lebanon; a brutal Israeli military occupation of the south, imposed in 1978; armed resistance which ended only when the liberation took place in 2000. In the meantime, supporters and opponents of the super-wealthy Rafik al Hariri, who became Prime Minister in late 1992, were engaged in bitter political disputes that dominated the public discourse.

It was inevitable that in this charged political climate, women's demands receded from the public interest. From the beginning of the post-war period the participation of women in politics had been a major demand. A women's quota in Parliament became the focus of discussions in the meetings I attended, but until the last elections in 2018 there was no public enthusiasm for such a quota. The demand for the political participation became more insistent following the 1995 Beijing conference, especially after Lebanon signed

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997.

Lebanon, like many other Arab countries, recorded several points of dissent from the articles of the Convention, and inevitably there was opposition in women's circles to these. I joined in some of the discussions on this national response in The League for Lebanese Women's Rights. The positions agreed upon in the meetings were announced in a series of press conferences. I do not know if from there they were ever included in official reports, or whether they had left any mark at all on the national discussions. I had gradually withdrawn from the meetings.

I had been to one or two of the preparatory meetings for the Beijing Conference, during which I felt myself alienated by the language used. I felt that the passion and anger of authentic feminist language had been co-opted and reduced to a passive and lifeless form, the jargon of the UN, the stiff, wooden speech of states and governments, and I felt it had little to do with me.

Several regional post-Beijing meetings took place at UNESCWA headquarters in Beirut. Various Arab government representatives offered their reports of their progress in women's health, education and political representation. Not unexpectedly, they gave themselves high marks, and I wondered if they thought a genuine women's movement had become redundant.

I had from the beginning felt that the goal of the movement should be the creation of a mass following to include enough women –and sympathetic men -- joining together not only to articulate demands but to see them to their achievement. Mass meetings, mass demonstrations, mass sit-ins – if these did not take place the question was: why not? Was it because women did not see a problem with their situation except when they were personally affected by one

or another of the oppressive laws? Should we not have worked to create a strong sense of solidarity based on the recognition that we were all involved in each other's problems?

In this way of thinking I had been deeply influenced by the uprising in the sixties and early seventies in the United States, where my family and I were living at the time. I was extremely moved not only by the events of this revolutionary period, but by its rhetoric and general discourse. The black Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and of course the feminist movement, each achieved mass mobilization and a mass following which produced for each of each of them produced texts that influenced huge numbers of people.

Even the quarrels within these groups added to the intensity and dissemination of their views. The civil rights gatherings, for instance, had important arguments over the use of violence. Some of the early 1960s feminist texts were greeted with anger by black and native American women, who saw them as elitist and relevant only to the white middle class.

These texts and counter-texts were an important lesson for me when, in the 1990s, I tried to think through the problems I perceived with the women's movement here, which I found too tame, too conservative, too deferential to the state and its battered institutions.

I was shocked one day when I attended a meeting called to celebrate the national day. The then Prime Minister was invited to address the largely female audience. A great banner welcoming him was hung across the street near the venue. In his speech, the PM echoed Qassim Amin's idea that women were "the mothers of the nation," and as such should be liberated and educated in order to produce more enlightened sons who would better serve the

nation. The PM's speech, which glorified women as a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves, was greeted with a standing ovation.

My own reaction was quite different: why were we paying homage to the very state whose oppressive laws we were supposed to be opposing? And why were we applauding its patronizing representatives?

Let me say here that I have no desire whatever to put down the brave, hard-working activists who have dedicated their lives to improving the condition of women. On the contrary I have great respect for them and their accomplishments, especially in their stubborn efforts to improve the laws. But I continue to maintain the need for a more radical, and more widespread approach to liberation, and the need to create a critical mass of women who could pose a credible opposition to the existing power structures.

Among the feminist trends that had had a deep influence on me was the rise of Women's Studies, meant to bring the production, both intellectual and otherwise, of women out of the darkness to which they had been consigned into an acknowledged space as writers, thinkers, musicians, artists, and so on. New biographies appeared of individual women of the past, including duchesses, nuns, actresses, writers, explorers; rich and poor, urban and country women. Books appeared on childbirth, on the development of bourgeois society, and the social meaning of housework. This kind of research produced a rich understanding of the variations inherent in the collective knowledge about women.

I became an obsessive evangelist for doing research on our own ancestresses, about whom not only I, but most of my friends and colleagues seemed to know very little that was based on real knowledge rather than hearsay. The phrase "*al turath*," was widely used defensively as a sharp arrow in the arsenal of

conservative arguments used to shoot down new ideas, visions and reforms concerning women. We must preserve our way of life, this position held, and we must not allow new ways to undermine our culture.

In 1990, my mother died: my sadness brought back to me memories of my grandmother, whose death in 1973 had broken my heart. Partly to assuage my grief, I embarked on a lengthy comparative study of the lives of my mother and her mother, and their influence on my generation.

Almost as soon as I put pen to paper I discovered that I knew hardly anything about their early lives. In order to understand them better I determined to research not only the details of their lives, but the clothes they wore, the songs they sang, the schools they attended and what they studied there, their teachers, the intimate nature of their families, and their place in their society and its economy.

When I began my work I found that there was next to nothing written about Arab women in the recent past, except a series of hagiographic titles about the (رائدات) pioneers of the women's movement. To me this emphasized the need to examine, not merely the lives of a handful of upper-class women, but of a wide spectrum of women and their participation society and modernization.

The great Arab historians I consulted, it was clear, were simply not interested in the subject of women. I had to create my own research plan, relying heavily on memoirs written at my request by my mother and her brothers during her final illness, as well as interviews, gossip, family letters, recipes, costumes.

As I worked, I made many discoveries about my ancestresses which astonished me by their contradictions of preconceptions. I found, for instance, that my great-grandmother, Mariam, who lived to a hundred and died in the early days

of the 20th century, was known in the Galilee as a famous horsewoman (فارسة). This discovery entirely changed my vision of her, and by extension, myself. I could now see her, not sitting submissively at home, but flying on her horse through the countryside with the men. Mariam was also known for her courage: if she saw a snake, I learned, she did not scream and call out for help. Instead, she crushed its head in with her boot!

I discovered that my maternal grandmother had been a professional teacher, and that she had enjoyed a deeply romantic marriage. I also learned that my grandfather, who was a Protestant pastor, used to share in the housework: one of his regular chores was to mash chickpeas for the *hummos* and the meat for *kibbe* in the big stone mortar with the heavy stone pestle. He was a kind man who loved animals.

These were not the stereotypical images of the submissive and oppressed Arab woman, or the stern, despotic Arab patriarch created by western travelers, especially women writers who had access to ordinary people's homes, and the "harems" of the great households. These travelers knew no Arabic, and so what they wrote about, especially conversations and family relationships, was heavily reliant on their imaginations.

As I worked, I became convinced that we had a great deal of homework to do on our past, and only if we did it could we talk about our history with any certainty. And only if we know our history can we then plan our future.

This essay was meant to be an account of my personal responses as a feminist to what women were doing and saying in the period immediately following the Civil War. I fear that it might sound negative in tone to some readers. If it does, I do not mean it to be. Whatever my criticisms of the women's movement in the 1990s, obviously some great good has come of it, as there is no question that

the situation of women has improved over the last decades, though not as much as we wish. A new generation of brave young feminists has been delving into a fresh analysis of society and creating new platforms, new avenues for discussion, new forms of inquiry and research. They are independent thinkers, and though they may disagree with one another, they have the courage to pursue their beliefs without personal rancor. My admiration for these young women knows no bounds.