



تسعينيات نسوية  
إعداد: ورشة المعارف

**Knowledge Workshop**  
<https://www.alwarsha.org/>  
ISBN 978-9953-0-5459-9  
2021

Supported by Mama Cash and Norwegian People's Aid. The content of the publication is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the positions of the Norwegian People's Aid or of Mama Cash.

## **NARRATING 1990s LEBANON FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

**Faces, people, stories, histories, narrated by feminists who lived through the decade, formed it, influenced it and were influenced by it.**

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The 1990s represented a turning point in Lebanon's history. It was a decade of prolonged collective uncertainty on the political and economic fronts, as the fractures that followed the civil war were seemingly irreconcilable. The 1990s was not solely concerned with the end of war, but also witnessed Lebanon's further entrenchment into intellectual, economic and feminist globalizations. The decade was marked by a series of significant sociopolitical upheavals, including uprisings and strikes, the restructuring of civil movements, as well as the marked re-emergence of women's and feminist movements. Because I am interested in a deeper understanding of the feminist experience during that decade, I present this essay as an overview based on in-depth interviews with several Lebanese and Palestinian feminists and organizers, among them are Lina Abou Habib, Aziza Al Khalidi, Zoya Rouhana, Iqbal Doughan, Caroline Succar, Leila Al Ali, Batoul Yahfoufi, Leila Mrouwe, Joumana Merhi, Rania Ibrahim, Mona Waked, Siham Antoun, Zeinab Shams and Hosn Abboud.<sup>1</sup>

This overview speaks to the memory of these feminists as they reflect on their experiences of the present as well as of the 1990s. They discuss the ideas that turned into achievements, disappointments, or perhaps remained unfulfilled hopes. This paper also presents some of the narratives around women in the nineties—their political, social, economic dimensions—addressing the unions' movement and the influence the decade left on these feminists' activism, in addition to the challenges they faced. I will also discuss what they mention about the postwar characteristics of feminist work, as well as the issue of violence that emerged within the human rights and social discourses.

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Many thanks to Zainab Chamoun for editing this paper in its English version.

<sup>1</sup> Interviews that took place using Zoom and WhatsApp applications between November 2020 and January, 2021.

Additionally, I will narrate their stories on the preparation for the 1995 Beijing Conference, which constituted the most significant mark in re-establishing the foundations of the feminist moment and left a deep impression on their lives and the lives of other feminists at the time worldwide. This overview also addresses the relationship between Lebanese and Palestinian feminists at that time, as well as the overall relationship between the various elements and components of the movement. Not to be overlooked is the critical and often un-narrated role played by women resisting the Israeli occupation and their attempts to join decision-making circles. Finally, I present a quick look at some of the issues and concerns that were absent from women's rights activism at the time, including the institutionalization of feminist work, in addition to many intellectual, cultural and conceptual turning points that accompanied the nineties.

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge the role the 1990s played in building a feminist memory in Lebanon; equally important is approaching this decade from a feminist perspective. It was a transitional period beginning with the signature of the "Taif Agreement" and the cessation of fighting, which allowed for the revival of civil and social movements, picking up where they left off prior to the war. The nineties also allowed the women's movement in Lebanon to intersect with broader, significant changes; including the global feminist effort and the human rights movement that crystallized through international conventions and treaties. While the civil war saw women's activism occupying a humanitarian role, the nineties reflected a shift into calls for lasting civil peace.

In addition to changing roles, the movement displayed some uncharacteristic and unique approaches that differed widely from its previous activities, employing legal methods, novel ways of expression, and the mobilization of public opinion to support its goals. The nineties were critical in launching

numerous feminist organizations that adopted a complete gender equality approach; there was a marked advancement in discourse and a beginning of serious efforts to adopt issues addressing violence. Additionally, feminist organizations also addressed the framework of personal status laws (within the Lebanese sectarian regime), personal rights, and the penal codes. At the time, the movement began to shyly tackle gender and sexual identities and the rights of migrant domestic workers, adopting a more progressive feminist discourse following the Beijing Conference. Thus, writing about feminists becomes an essential exercise, given that their activism is often under-represented and its impact overlooked, even by the feminist activists themselves. They have faced many struggles and obstacles in their fight, without necessarily being aware of the significant impact their efforts had in shaping a feminist path in Lebanon; one that aims to reclaim rights and build collective knowledge and awareness.

### **A Decade of Setbacks for the Workers Union's Movement**

The importance of addressing feminism in the nineties lies in its concurrence with the dramatic downfall of the workers' union activism. As the workers' union activism declined and post-civil war clashes began, political, social, economic movements were on the rise. Demands varied between economic and labor concerns, the manipulation of the Lira rate and the declining purchasing power of citizens, as well as political demands vis-à-vis regional causes. The latter protests included calls to support Iraq in the Gulf war, solidarity with the Palestinian people and their Intifada against Israeli occupation, as well as the opposition of the presence of Syrian military forces in Lebanon. A recent study<sup>2</sup> on postwar social movements in Lebanon indicated that 34% of protests at the time championed social concerns, within which women's rights movements occupied a fair space. In spite of this momentum, the workers' union

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<sup>2</sup> A study prepared by the Assistant Professor at the American University of Beirut, Rima Majed for the Center for Lebanese studies, 2020. Available at: <https://lebanesestudies.com/research-programs/social-movement/>

movement in Lebanon was in a continued downward spiral, fueled by a political will to limit any labor movement that posed a threat to the sectarian power-sharing system and the political elite's neoliberal approach. The governments following the war participated in limiting the role of the syndicates and unions by further restricting the role of the General Laborers Union; notably, they imprisoned the then-president of the Union, Elias Abou Rizk. In my interview with Siham Antoun, a secondary school teacher and unions activist in Ras Baalbek, she notes that "what the trade unions movement faced in the nineties was a systematic form of assassination organized by the political authorities in the country with the support of the Lebanese and Syrian security regimes." Siham adds:

*"As independents, leftists and a free unions' movement, we were able to exert influence in the early nineties, but that represented the last major impact at the level of the General Laborers Union's activities in the country. After that, the illusory syndicates appeared, along with intimidation and bribery, leading to a complete collapse of the workers' union's work...the political parties took over these organizations."*

At the same time, while the workers' union activity was regressing, women's and teachers' movements were progressing, converging, and developing. In fact, the teachers' movement had always supported the feminist movement considering that the majority of the educational body in the nineties was constituted of women. Siham mentions that during those times, maternity leave was a direct result of the work and struggles of educational committees in the workers' union. According to her, the Association of the Secondary Education was "the last castle of free collectives' work." It was the entity that worked towards achieving equality in wages and fair social benefits among women and men. In this regard, Wadad Chakhtoura, a Lebanese feminist

activist, was a prominent figure calling for these demands across various regions in the country.

The essay makes frequent mentions of the two concepts, “feminism” and “women’s movement”; however, they do not mean the same thing. According to the activists and researchers interviewed, “women’s movement” or “women’s rights movement” refers to a movement that is led by women and addressing some of their demands, or that has an aid-related/humanitarian aspect. Feminism, on the other hand, represents the work and struggle to achieve and establish gender equality, based on the core belief that inequality is rooted in economic and social structures, the political system, and its institutions. Equality, according to the feminist movement, cannot be achieved until these structures and practices are confronted, without compromise i.e. the adoption of all of women’s issues in the face of patriarchal and authoritarian narratives and practices. Feminism also addresses oppression and marginalization experienced by women on bases that are now described as intersectional.

Batoul Yahfoufi, a university professor, philosophy researcher and feminist activist, speaks of the linguistic reforms that occurred in the nineties. She suggests that the use of “women’s movement” or Al Haraka Al Nisae’iya was due to the vagueness of the concept of “feminism” at the time, often interpreted as animosity towards men. Batoul also attributes this linguistic characteristic to the rise of the European feminist waves that “called for hatred towards men,” which she notes was not the case in Lebanon. In her interview, she stresses on the fact that Lebanese feminism in the nineties was neither radical, extreme, nor verbally violent, contrary to the example of Egypt.

In December 2020, I attended an intergenerational dialogue that included Lina Abou Habib—the feminist, activist, researcher and director of the Asfari Institute—and Joumana Merhi—the feminist activist and director of the Arab

Institute for Human Rights. Lina and Joumana argued that feminists were able to create a dichotomy between radical feminist standpoints and others that were softer and more complicit, in order to shape and establish the genealogy for today's young feminists. The contemporary feminist movement developed a more inclusive and progressive and reformist discourse, which was in large part due to the struggle of the feminism in the nineties.

### **Newfound Realizations and Shifting towards Feminist Consciousness**

The importance of the 1990s is twofold: first, it was critical for building consciousness around women's demands and civil peace; and second, it was a transitional moment and discursive shift that emphasized the concepts around women's rights. Iqbal Doughan; a lawyer, activist and the president of the Lebanese Women's Council, states that the awareness created was an achievement by itself and holding on to that was necessary. According to Iqbal, even if there were no immediate or major changes visible, the nineties constituted a significant building block in a long path of collective work as well as a preparatory stage for a significant turn over in feminism.

Aziza Al Khalidi remembers the nineties as well. An activist, researcher and feminist, Aziza remembers how the nineties shaped the person that she is today in numerous ways. She was, back then, in her "early feminist consciousness stages," but was full of ideas and the nineties came to merge these thoughts with practice:

*"I built my feminist consciousness and personality [at the time] and I transformed from an activist to a researcher then to a feminist, this is what the nineties brought me, they refined my mindfulness and understandings of women's issues."*

She adds that the nineties were a distant past that birthed the concept of pioneers or Rae'dat:



*“What we witnessed in the nineties and what we see every time is the tip of the iceberg, but the rest of the iceberg is an accumulation of all that happened before and all the work these women did in the past.”*

Regarding the notion of feminist consciousness, Aziza adds that the feminists transcended the internal frustration that was created by the war and its mental and emotional burdens, which affected them in a deeply personal manner and reshaped their decisions and fates. It was this very frustration that came close to killing the feminist spirit and abolishing the concept of self-agency for women as independent and capable humans. Hosn Abboud, a researcher, lecturer, literary critic and a member of the Lebanese Researchers’ Association shares her views that are similar to Aziza’s:

*“No one knows what the war really took from us, insofar as we were forced to leave the country. The war was severe and difficult, and the nineties represented an opportunity to rebuild ourselves. I was trying to rebuild myself from the very beginning.”*

Caroline Succar, a feminist activist and the vice president of the Lebanese Democratic Association for Women notes:

*“At the time, Lebanon had not risen [from the ashes], but it was a transitory period that relied on attempts at building the state’s institutions and on reconstructing legislations...The dominant aspect of the movement back then was related to the women’s movement, Nisa’i and not feminism.”*

The revolution against the patriarchy did not occupy as prominent space among the women’s movement then as it later did. “There was an enlightened and progressive effort that aimed at making a radical change for some, but this awareness was not present among everyone. Some associations were not

independent from political parties and sects,” Caroline notes. She also mentions the importance of the shift of the movement’s work from humanitarian aid to legal reform, especially after Lebanon ratified the CEDAW<sup>3</sup> convention in 1996.

Zoya Rouhana, a feminist activist and the founding director of KAFA association, adds that the transition from relief work into advocacy and legal reform was the result of the “movement’s maturity, the interaction with the external feminist work, in addition to the achievements that happened in neighboring countries.”

When we speak of conceptual “understandings” in the nineties, we are referring to the pioneers who contributed to the rise of feminist faces and the development of feminist tools. One of the most significant women in this regard is “Wadad Chakhtoura”. Her name appeared in almost every interview we conducted, always spoken with love, respect and passion.<sup>4</sup> Leila Mrouwe, a feminist activist and President of the Lebanese Democratic Association for Women, mentions that Wadad was active for fifty years with the Communist Labor Organization, the teachers’ union and voluntarily in the women’s movement. She also mentions that Wadad had a professional character with a modern, forward-thinking mentality. There were other testimonies about Wadad and her feminist activism:

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<sup>3</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), “adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.” Available at: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm> Lebanon ratified the convention in 1996 along with reservations on articles related to the Nationality right and the personal status laws. The Lebanese feminist movement uses this convention as a man reference and an advocacy tool.

<sup>4</sup> The testimonies are extracted from the in-depth interviews and from “A path of activism” film by Hayat Mershad on Wadad Chakhtoura. Wadad’s name recurred in most of the interviews with a lot of respect and appreciation.

*“In the past, when I was young, Wadad was my role model and one of the people who influenced me the most in my life” - Joumana Merhi*

*“Wadad was a friend, a genuine feminist, and a fighter with a progressive vision. She was progressive in her approach with pioneering ideas, ahead of her time” - Lina Abou Habib*

*“Her word was above the word of the donors and she never compromised her values. She was a real feminist, and I became involved in the feminist work, because of her” - Caroline Succar*

*“Wadad opened the door when she heard them threatening me, she did not remain silent, she called for an investigation into the matter” - Siham Antoun on an incident during which Wadad came to her defense, which will be discussed later on in the essay.*

Wadad’s vision was contradictory to the country’s post-war sectarian nature; unlike many, she did not engage with social and/or political elites, which left a tangible, positive effect on the people who knew her. This fact also made her an example that influenced the women’s movement in the nineties; Wadad always listened to the feminists’ demands, inspired them and led their protests. She went to the Beijing Conference with a significantly progressive speech on women’s issues although her activism started long before then. Wadad, with her progressive and feminist mind, self, being and discourse personified an alternative to the civil war’s legacy and was the refuge and example for many activist women. Her personality comprised three main characteristics: the feminist who fights for women’s rights, the union activist in the teachers’ movement, and the political communist activist. These three descriptions are intimately linked to three institutions that witnessed significant transformations during the nineties.

In addition to Wadad Chakhtoura, Laure Moghaizel was also mentioned for her influential work in the legal field. Though she was part of the Kataeb Party, Laure withdrew her membership at the start of the civil war, instead establishing the Democratic Party with her husband Joseph Moghaizel, which described itself as a moderate “non-violent” Party. Laure centered her work around non-violence and restoring civil peace; however, she is considered a controversial figure in contemporary feminist memory because of her traditional approach and outlook vis-à-vis certain women’s issues. It is often said that she was reserved and quiet about the issue of violence against women during the Beijing conference. In the memories and testimonies of the feminists I interviewed, many names recurred: Linda Matar, Aman Shaarani, Hind Atwi (passed away in 2017), Marcelle Abdel Samad (passed away in 2020), Fahmiya Charafeddine, Azza Mrouwe (passed away in 2018), among others.

### **Knowledge and Intellectual Testimonies**

On the intellectual level, the 1990s demonstrated a significant involvement of women researchers, teachers, and social activists in the process of building a feminist knowledge as well as a knowledge for women and society. Hosn Abboud examines these activities and the evolution of discourse in women’s novels. She discusses the experience of Lebanese women researchers who gathered and collaborated within a collective called “Women for Scientific Research” to protect their research work and activism. They documented their experience in an article titled, “The Patience in Being”, which was published in the mid-nineties within the first book issued by the “Lebanese Researchers’ Association”. Hosn Abboud also recalls her participation with Lebanese researchers Mona Fayyad, Fadia Hoteit and Nahawand Al Kaderi and others in the “100 Years on the Liberation of Arab Women” Conference in Cairo in 1999.

The conference was organized by the Egyptian Higher Council of Culture to celebrate the 100th anniversary of publishing Kassem Amin’s book, “Liberating

Women”. The purpose behind the conference was to revive and reclaim the “Arab feminist renaissance” through modern and contemporary approaches. The conference reunited the Lebanese researchers with more than 100 Arab feminist researchers, which constituted an “Arab feminist protest”. The research gatherings and knowledge sharing that took place during that time aimed to support women researchers, particularly those who were in the beginning of their scholarly pursuits. They also aimed to initiate discussions around women’s issues in a more public manner and to empower the feminist discourse.

Siham Antoun talks about the Lebanese educational curricula that were reformed in 1997 and describes them as “detrimental with regards to gender,” despite their attempts to reform the portrayal of gender social roles. Prior to that, women were represented as home-makers in school books while men were portrayed as reading newspapers. Following the reforms, women were shown reading to their children and doing other activities. Nevertheless, on the linguistic and conceptual fronts, the curricula remained extremely patriarchal and are still in need of reform today, with their transformation requiring the joint efforts of the feminist movement. Zeinab Shams, a retired teacher and social-political activist, remembers her intellectual activism in the nineties. Back then, with the help of her colleagues in Hermel (a historically marginalized region in north Lebanon), they established a large library through connecting with knowledge-based and cultural organizations, visiting homes to collect books from the people themselves. Zeinab remembers the impact of the library on forming an important intellectual and cultural hub for the residents of the area.

Although the Moroccan researcher and critic Said Yakteen says that the nineties witnessed the peak in feminist writing in Arab novels and literary

critique, Batoul Yahfoufi mentions that the Lebanese feminist form of narrations and literary critique arrived later.

### **After the War: A Reconciliation that Never Was**

*“Women met around the National Museum, the place where people used to fight in the past. It was a significant moment” - Caroline Succar*

The civil strife escalated due to sectarian and political conflicts, and women were the first victims of this violence during and following the war. The women’s movement in Lebanon took it upon itself to first gather its scattered pieces, and then combine these dispersed efforts to create an opportunity—albeit a slim one—for reconciliation. It is important to note; however, that these attempts began taking shape even earlier during the war. Despite these endeavors, an inclusive national reconciliation did not transpire, the desired transitional justice was not achieved, and the post-war reconstruction process arrived in the most unfair form of arrangements. Contrary to what was hoped for, the nineties pushed the warlords to the forefront of the political scene and allowed them to exert a firm grip on the country’s authoritative structures. The postwar state adopted a “forget and ignore” policy, which was a notion that some women activists also called for in the hopes that they could rebuild and overcome the war’s trauma and miseries that hindered the unification of their movement. In that light, the women’s movement worked towards talking, meeting, and reconciling.

Remembering those times, Batoul Yahfoufi notes:

*“When I first met Laure Moghaizel, I was amazed at how she could cross all the borders and barricades created by the war to talk about unification and peace. Trust me, women in Lebanon never called for war and were never the lords of war, but rather they worked towards unification and peace.”*

The Lebanese Council of Women returned and reunited; however, their integration on the civil society and activist scenes was challenging, as feminist organizations that ideologically transcended sects and regions were very few, according to Joumana Merhi. Joumana adds: “The question that the movement should have asked of the moment and of itself, was to what extent did these women’s organizations reflect on the civil war, along with their role in response to it and its consequences?” In fact, the civil war created many ruptures between the Lebanese and the Palestinian women’s movements and among various elements of the Lebanese women’s movement itself.

According to Aziza Al Khalidi, “the war impacted the perceptions among both the Lebanese and the Palestinian women’s movements. There was a real fear among the Palestinian society, a fear from the legacy of political fighting and a feeling of danger.”

The feminist activist and the director of Al Najdeh Social Association, Leila Al Ali, adds: “I noticed that, in Lebanon, there was a distinction between the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian community in the camps; Lebanese people empathize with the Palestinian cause when it comes to Israeli attacks, but do not show the same empathy or support when it is related to the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanese refugee camps.”

This is partly related to the rupture caused by the civil war and the racist discourses that followed it. The unbalanced and unfair development and reconstruction efforts that followed the war widened the inequalities along racial, ethnic, sociopolitical and economic lines, and hindered the cohesion of the feminist fabric. This developmental imbalance was not restricted to central cities, suburbs and villages, but also appeared in the camps and in the prohibition of their reconstruction, as part of certain political “agendas” that exist to this day.

The civil war exacerbated identitarian divides and some people retreated into smaller groups and communities as a result. Given that sectarian discourse persisted even after the cessation of armed fighting, there were women activists who were also part of this trend, finding it difficult to overcome sectarian divides and untangle their feelings regarding the civil war. It is precisely at this juncture that the different approaches regarding personal status codes appear, oscillating between legal and sectarian discourses. The women's movement in Lebanon was not in complete solidarity on this topic, neither unified nor having one, clear vision. On the one hand, this might be a legacy of the war; on the other hand, it relates to the acquiescence of certain factions of the women's movement to the sectarian political system that ruled the country.

*“We were in a protest in the nineties and we raised the demand for a legislation of a unified civil law for people in Lebanon. Then, the protest got divided and a part of the organizations and the women who were there left and made a statement refusing this demand and denying their connection to the protest.” - Leila Mrouwe*

*“They were ignoring the fact that their sectarian personal status codes were tightening the noose around women's necks.” – Aziza Al Khalidi*

### **Breaking Through the Unions and the Municipalities**

The quota issue was prevalent in the discussion of most women's rights organizations during the nineties. The issue was very well received in the official realm, given that it did not contradict with the sectarian and economic establishments of Lebanon's postwar political regime. Despite being welcomed in public discourses, the women's movement's efforts and calls for instating the political quota did not result in any significant change. While some point to the elections that followed the war as examples of the policy's success, given the slight increase of female representation in government, these efforts were and



remain based on familial, political and regional criteria. They are aligned with the ruling elites' vision, constituted without considerations of women's issues and at the expense of any form of gender justice, equality or protection.

Nevertheless, the nineties brought about serious attempts to break through the resistant frameworks of workers' unions and municipalities. Women ran for elections in regions where religious political parties dominated and had often refused to nominate female candidates. These political and activist efforts were strongly tied to the feminist struggle, and several examples stand out. In 1998, Zeinab Shams participated in Hermel's municipal elections, held for the first time in 35 years. Zeinab ran against a list comprised of and supported by the coalition of political and religious parties that had no women on their roster. She lost the elections, but describes her loss as "honorable" because she ran, and gathered a good number of votes, despite the threats and personal attacks against her.

During the preparation for the municipal elections in 1997, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) launched the "My country, my village, my municipality" campaign that was active in several Lebanese regions. Back then, a significant part of women's movement in the country effectively and strongly participated in the campaign. The campaign gathered students, activists, legal figures, and writers in an attempt to prevent political parties from taking over the municipalities as they did in the parliamentary elections in 1992 and 1996.

In the nineties, the teachers' union reunified after being sharply divided during the civil war. It offered significant direct and indirect support for the feminist movement, especially in matters concerning wages, leaves and compensations. Siham Antoun ran for the unions' elections in Bekaa and made a breakthrough by winning against a list that was formed and supported by the dominant

political parties. The list through which Siham ran for elections was formed spontaneously:

*“Once I won the elections, my work started to develop. I was in contact with Wadad Chakhtoura who was in the Central Council of the Teachers’ Union. I used to tell her about the bad situation of the union and the political intrusions, and she used to support me. One time, the religious parties in Bekaa won all the seats in the union and I was the only one who won from outside their list. They wanted to use some religious expressions and statements in the press releases of the union, and I objected their decision. I told them that it is a very political act despite taking a religious form and then a clash happened, and they attacked me verbally.” – Siham Antoun*

Siham continues, “When we arrived at the Central Council of the Teachers’ Union in Beirut for an investigation around the clash, they attacked me verbally again and they threatened me but Wadad who had heard them, confronted them, defended me and made a big issue out of it... I was in the beginning of my activist journey, I was 23 years old at the time. And it is there where I discovered the feminist face of Wadad Chakhtoura.”

Joumana Merhi speaks of the internal revolution that was ignited by women against the authoritarian practices of men within the leftist and communist parties during the nineties. Joumana mentions that feminism is “an unwanted agenda” even among the leftist parties who fought for important national issues. According to her, women erroneously accepted men’s faults for the sake of preserving the broader interests of their political parties. Batoul Yahfoufi adds that this dynamic, which reached the extent of exploiting women within some parties, was a result of the patriarchal culture deeply rooted in the Lebanese society’s subconscious. She notes that these attacks and violations stem from the normalization of this patriarchal culture by men of different

backgrounds and is not related to the nature of the party or its ideology, but to the society itself.

**Women Facing Israeli Occupation: Neither the Narrators nor the Narrated**

*“The resilience and resistance of women in the face of the Israeli occupation is a hidden and invisible form of feminist movement. The struggles of women were not only undocumented as feminist activism but also were not mentioned in the history of the Israeli occupation from the beginning. I know a woman martyr from “Shhour,” South Lebanon, she was a reporter and was killed on the front lines. She is never mentioned; her name was Ni’am, but we never knew her surname... They talk about the resisting families. Well, who are the families? Families are the women; women led the families and confronted the occupation, however their achievements are not recognized, neither within the families nor during the war.”*

- Aziza Al Khalidi

During the nineties, Israel was still occupying the South of Lebanon. Women, like men, confronted the occupation despite their ideological differences. Nevertheless, the narratives and stories about the occupation often erase the role of Lebanese and Palestinian women even though they resisted Israel directly through the Lebanese National Resistance Front, the Palestinian Liberation Front and other organizations. Women in their own communities and in the streets performed different activities that constituted parts of a broader resistance effort. The feminists themselves recount how in one of the southern villages, the women threw boiled oil on Israeli soldiers.

The narration of women’s role in resistance is also absent, given that the history of women confronting the Israeli occupation was never addressed or taught through a feminist lens, and its recounting never told from women’s perspectives; instead, it was narrated by men, and more specifically politicians.

*“Women do not talk about what they do or what they give. Their struggles and sacrifices are unseen and unheard. And this is the case in many Arab countries that witnessed liberation movements. Look at the Yemeni revolution that had women at the core of it, where are the women today? Where are they in the history?” – Leila Mrouwe*

Feminists have often placed the blame on leftist political parties in particular, as they had women at the core of their work and activism, but did not acknowledge the political and activist roles these women played. Joumana Merhi notes that after the militias stopped fighting, no one worked on rehabilitating the women fighters; they were left behind to face the social stigma of being former fighters on their own. Lina Abou Habib also mentions women who were detained in the Israeli prisons. She talks about their stories and states that apart from Suha Bechara, these women are rarely or never mentioned; as a result, their stories disappear and are forgotten with time. According to Lina, it is essential to narrate, transmit, and illuminate these stories so that the broader public knows what happened to the women who resisted.

### **In the Palestinian Camps: An Early Consciousness about Causes and Strategies**

*“From the mid-seventies, I have witnessed a growing awareness concerning women’s rights in the camps. Of course, this was not a political decision, but the result of conscious and focused work carried out by the women in the camps...They began establishing daycare centers in the seventies, and they continued throughout the nineties. This is the result of feminist awareness and an understanding of the important role women in work play. These women understood that the work of women is related to the issue of rights.” – Aziza Al Khalidi*

The Palestinian camps in Beirut, in the South, in the North and in Baalbek worked in parallel to the women' activist movement in the rest of the country, and oftentimes were related to, or stemmed from, the feminist activist legacies of the camps themselves. The activism of the women in the camps stemmed from the urgent need to advance the status of women who endure more than one form of oppression and discrimination.

The Palestinian women's movement in the camps adopted advanced activist frameworks when addressing feminist issues, such as the issue of violence against women. During the nineties, some of the Lebanese associations were approaching violence through consultations, listening services, and through hotline calls. However, the feminist movement in the camps took things further by investigating the contextual framework of this issue within the Palestinian community and through carrying out assessments and early screenings. Rania Ibrahim, an activist in Tadamon Association, mentions that the feminist movement in the Palestinian camps was aware of and active around sexual harassment since the nineties, long before the discussion around this issue began among the Lebanese activist platforms.

The Palestinian feminist community experienced continuous marginalization—a longstanding political struggle—and had an in-depth experience in organized work, which helped normalize the feminist movement in the camps and led to the early maturity of its feminists. Leila Al Ali mentions that the Palestinians were the first to establish a feminist parliament and the first to develop a gender sensitive constitution, especially members of Ae'sha Network (a coalition that was further developed after the Beijing Conference, discussed later on in the essay), seeing their gender-based struggle as an inseparable part of a broader, global fight. This maturity in activism is linked to grassroots efforts and community cohesion. This form of collective awareness and unity is sometimes missing from the Lebanese women's movement, which suffers from

a lack of or limited contact with rural areas, villages, the suburbs and the local communities.

*“The cohesion is a result of physical proximity, as the Lebanese society is open but the Palestinian camps are closed; this created a positive organizing impact on the Palestinian institutions.” – Aziza Al Khalidi*

In Palestinian camps, organizations who work on the ground are managed by activists from within the local communities, within a collective feminist movement for change. However, since their focus is on activism and organizing rather than conceptualizing a theoretical framework for their movement, they often do not frame themselves as feminists.

Mona Waked, an activist in Al Najdeh Association in Saida, states that Palestinian women’s institutions are aware of the importance of feminist solidarity, adding that the union between Lebanese and Palestinian associations occurred, but was very limited. One of the main examples of this union is manifested through the decision of the Lebanese Democratic Association for Women to work with and inside the camps and to constantly collaborate with the Palestinian feminist movement. However, aside from the Lebanese Democratic Association for Women, Lebanese associations did not always have a solid and clear agenda towards collaborating with the camps and only a few considered that the openness to the Palestinian society should be on their agenda.

Leila Al Ali mentions that the Lebanese Union for Women initially never worked for the rights of refugee women. However, since the Beijing Conference, the cultural encounter between Palestinian and Lebanese women—even those on the political right—began taking shape. They worked together on some common

campaigns despite the incessant racist discourse against Palestinians espoused by some Lebanese associations.

The Lebanese women's movement worked on gradually introducing some feminist concepts and notions in a way that was socially palatable, particularly with the adoption of a secular discourse and a narrative that resisted violence against women. As a result, the word "feminism" became more widely accepted and used. Leila Al Ali also addressed the continuous participation of Palestinian women in Lebanon in issues related to the Palestinian national cause and to the protection of camps. Palestinian women were present in both armed and social activism; however, this participation neither developed fully nor did it allow women to occupy decision-making positions, especially at the political party level, and more particularly among the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

### **The Beijing Conference: Crossroads and New Beginnings**

*"The Beijing conference had a dramatic impact on the transformation and the restructuring of the feminist movement in Lebanon. It paved the way to communicate with global feminism, developed the advocacy tools needed and helped us as women in Lebanon to learn many things that we didn't know about."* - Lina Abou Habib

In September of 1995, the United Nations held the Fourth International Conference for Women in Beijing. Many representative delegations on behalf of governments, independent movements, and civil society were present. At the end of the conference, the delegations of 189 governments fully adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which constituted a political commitment for governments "to advance the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere, and to guarantee the full implementation

of the human rights approach for women and girls.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Beijing Conference was an important event in the nineties. The preparations for Beijing were also significant and cumulative in Lebanon, lasting for two years during which many meetings and workshops took place across different regions in the country on the levels of associations and independent activists.

Among the feminists I interviewed, Lina Abou Habib, Zoya Rouhana, and Leila Al Ali attended the Beijing Conference while Caroline Succar, Leila Mrouwe, Joumana Merhi, Batoul Yahfoufi, Hosn Abboud, and Aziza Al Khalidi passionately discussed the impact the event had on them personally and on the movement in general.

Zoya Rouhana notes, “The conference was important for the creation of a suitable environment to raise awareness on women’s issues.” Joumana talks about how the conference impacted feminism: “It was about the normalization of the concept of human rights within feminist issues.” Leila Mrouwe adds, “Beijing was the starting point that initiated networking, not only in Lebanon but also in the world.” Caroline Succar also speaks of the importance of meeting with feminists from different societies, backgrounds and directions and talks about the importance of learning from them. She states, “*When feminists meet, it is inspirational despite the different viewpoints discussed.*”

Some of those who did not participate in the conference, participated in the Amman Forum, a regional, organizational preparatory meeting that constituted the biggest Arab women’s workshop in history. It gathered more than one thousand activists, listed the ideas and issues that were to be discussed in

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<sup>5</sup> The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action  
[https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing\\_Declaration\\_and\\_Platform\\_for\\_Action.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf)



Beijing, and prepared the arguments before the delegations were set to travel to China.

During the preparation for the conference, an independent delegation gathering unions, civil society legal organizations, and organizations that were members of and outside the Lebanese Council for Women was formed. As a result, Lebanon was represented through two delegations, an official and an independent one.

Though the conference had the potential of portraying the lived realities for women in Lebanon, the Lebanese delegations in Beijing had differing viewpoints. While some organizations spoke of gender-based violence as a significant problem that threatened women's lives, others severely objected to this rhetoric and highlighted Lebanon's progressiveness and advanced women's rights as compared to other Arab states. The conference was the beginning of a "filtering" mechanism among women activists, a process "that continues until today," according to Joumana Merhi. After Beijing, the National Commission for Lebanese Women and the Committee to Follow-up on Women's Issues were formed.

Some ministries and official organizations also began adopting the integration of gender in their work as a step towards rooting the feminist agenda in the official and institutional work. Over the following years, women's issues became more present in different fields and some of these ministries began collaborating with feminist organizations in a step that can be perceived as a "superficial exploitation of the feminist cause", far from any consistent aims and efforts at reform. Most of these attempts occurred with the intention of securing international funding dedicated to feminist issues or for gaining public support, although some of these attempts aimed at widening demands, awareness and knowledge.

The feminists interviewed spoke passionately about Beijing, and its significant influence in redirecting the feminist movement towards its legal and rights-based aspects. And while some feminists describe the conference as transformative, others say that it was a formative and constructive moment.

*“Attending the previous conferences was usually exclusive for the (elite) of men and women. The plans, the titles, and the ideas that resulted from these conferences were never widely circulated. However, the Beijing Conference produced more expansive elements, that the women’s centers and organizations started to approach women’s issues with a more grounded approach, clarity and consciousness towards feminist discourse. By then, we started to talk more about equality, civil rights, civil marriage and all the concepts that were previously mentioned very carefully and fearfully. This conference gave us a voice, gave us momentum. All feminist initiatives in Lebanon became stronger with the Beijing Conference and at the same time, we built a new form of awareness around new issues through the interaction with the global feminist community.”* – Batoul Yahfoufi

Both Leila Al Ali and Lina Abou Habib mention that Beijing was the start of the journey towards conceptualizing “feminism” and “coalition” as part of activist discourse in Lebanon. Leila Mrouwe adds that after Beijing, they began to name the movement as feminist, whereas before the conference, it was referred to as a women’s movement or a women’s rights movement. This reflected the movement’s espousal of Human Rights and Legal approaches—inspired by the Beijing declaration—and its adoption of equality as a central concept, without compromise and without limitations to the field of humanitarian work. After Beijing, fundamental feminist issues started to be discussed and addressed after years of being avoided, such as violence, sexual violence and sexual rights.

### **Activists in Denial... Let's Talk About Violence**

According to Leila Mrouwe, the issues of violence, marital rape, and “honor crimes” became more openly discussed after Beijing, without fear or equivocation. These are topics that most activists used to sidestep as mentioned by Zoya Rouhana and Iqbal Doughan. Those who attended the Beijing Conference recall that members of the official Lebanese delegation rejected the idea that violence against women existed in Lebanon, reflecting the wide ideological divides among the different factions of the women’s movement in Lebanon and filtering out individuals who held these varying beliefs.

Remembering the aforementioned historical moment, Batoul Yahfoufi notes:

*"In the beginning of the nineties, whenever we had a conference about violence, we were accused of interfering between women and their husbands; later, we started talking about the issue without being faced with these claims. People began listening to us and because it was easy to move between Beirut and other regions [after the war], we were able to spread more awareness and ideas about violence in all Lebanese districts. I am not saying that all women adopted our ideas but the feminist language on violence became familiar. Knowledge about violence and how to counter it found its way towards villages."*

Leila Al Ali recalls the circumstances surrounding the founding of the Ae’sha Network (later mentioned as Ae’sha), the first regional secular network working on gender equality in the Arab region. Founded after the Beijing Conference, the network aimed to resist violence against women, and was based on a funding system. Among its participants were: Al Najdeh Association, the Democratic Lebanese Association for Women and Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Woman, from Lebanon.

Ae’sha established the Arab Women’s Court to convict individuals who committed violence and abuse against women. The courts presented

testimonies from women from various Arab countries who were exposed to violence. These were symbolic trials, where the judges were women and they intended to create a sense of justice for abused women who could not and did not experience justice in real courts.

As Lina Abou Habib says, *“The experience of women’s trials was amazing because it took the subject of violence against women to the forefront, moved it to the public sphere and started to create awareness around it.”*

And when commenting on the personal status code framework that restricts any attempt to resist violence against women, Leila Ali says: *“There is no sectarian regime that does not cover and hide a form of violence against women.”*

### **Issues Missing from the Feminist Agenda**

Some causes that are present on the feminist agenda today were not addressed by the women’s movement in the nineties, such as queer rights, the rights of migrant domestic workers in addition to raising awareness about financial and economic policies.

The queer issue—despite being rooted in global feminist discourse, being fundamental to the issue of personal rights and agency over self and body, and being a sexual identity issue—was absent from the Lebanese women’s movement discourse in the nineties for many reasons. A significant part of the women’s movement in Lebanon adopted “traditional” ideological frameworks, avoiding controversial issues that could disturb the public, political authorities and the religious powers. As a result, the issue of queer rights was marginalized, especially since that the movement itself was, to a large extent, conventional.

*“The movement in its intersectional structure was not as matured and crystallized as it is today, and the conceptual understanding of gender binaries*

*was in need of broader perception and development. In the 1990s, a large part of the movement did not only avoid clashing with the society but was also not convinced with these rights and the necessity of fighting for them,”* Lina Abou Habib notes.

Leila Mrouwe mentions that the movement was traditional to a high extent which impacted the space given to these issues within activist agendas, activist discourse, society or even among legislators. She states, “The movement was not only traditional but was also getting out of a civil war, which impacted its priorities and interests and created a kind of division among the issues it adopted. The dominance of national activism also prevented women’s movement from adopting radical speech. The movement was in need for a long time to own and use this language, ideologies and practices.”

Instead, a significant part of the women’s movement struggles was directed towards women’s political rights, as this was an area that did not clash with the existing sectarian system or social taboos; thus, it was difficult to refute. This approach dissolved many essential gender issues and relegated the struggle to the realm of weak and void discourses.

*“The conversation about queer rights is a part of the maturing journey of the feminist movement. The women’s movement was not complete; it was premature and was only discussing the basic causes. Although they knew about the needs and struggles of the queer movement, they sidelined them.”* - Aziza Al Khalidi

After Beijing, the feminist path in Lebanon coincided with global feminist struggles, placing queer issues on the map, and allowing them to be later adopted in the international conventions and global frameworks. These intersections were also due to the rise of a new generation of feminists who decided to fight for queer rights. Despite being met with oppression when

discussing the issue of sexuality in Lebanon, numerous activists attempted to find and create safe spaces that forged alternative discourses. These efforts were particularly important as international funding to support queer issues, research, and projects was not common or widely available at the time.

Lebanon the nineties witnessed economic inflation accompanied by an artificial change in and then stabilization of the Lebanese Lira exchange rate. This allowed numerous Lebanese families to recruit migrant workers to help them in their houses or in their organizations. In parallel to this, the establishment and adoption of the sponsorship (kafala) system enabled the violation of migrant workers' human and economic rights, according to Zoya Rouhana.

Lina Abou Habib notes that there is a lack of feminist economists and figures, not only in Lebanon, but also in the entire Arab region. According to Lina, this dearth of voices led to the absence of necessary concepts and vocabulary related to the economic rights of women, in turn limiting women's understandings of the economic conditions, contexts, and consequences around them. She adds that the conversation around unpaid care work or the care economy, which constitutes an economic violation of women's rights, started globally in the eighties but has only very recently been discussed in Lebanon and the Arab region.

Although the 1990s witnessed the largest influx of migrant workers to Lebanon, the discourse surrounding their rights and the violations they were exposed to was very timid. Women were recruited from Asian and African countries to work in Lebanon through processes removed from human rights' conventions and standards, and devoid of any moral considerations. In most households, migrant workers were subjected to unfair conditions and low wages. Most of the attempts to help migrant workers were approached from a moral standpoint rather than any legal, developmental, sustainable or change-led approaches. In reality, these issues were missing from the activist

framework because the feminist movement lacked the structure that enabled it to adopt migrant worker issues and allocate a space for them on its activism agenda. There was a need to find a thorough and grounded feminist framework to gather the movement's diverse concerns.

Among other issues that were absent from the women's movement agenda in the nineties was a lack of awareness surrounding the financial and economic policies in place, despite the major economic changes that were taking place in Lebanon at the time. The country was on a path of extreme neoliberal transformations, including the dollarization of economy, pegging the local exchange rate to the dollar, indebtedness, privatization, the accumulation of interests, and the limited access to services and public properties. This was occurring at the same time as the regression of workers' unions and the exploitation of labor issues for political incentives. Despite this radically changing context, the women's movement never addressed these issues and the activist voices around this topic were drowned out if not completely absent, as noted by the women I interviewed.

Nevertheless, it was women who bore the brunt of the economic policies and practices that were implemented in the 1990s. They endured exploitation in the informal economy, low wages, unstable employment, lack of social benefits and ineffective interventions for their worsening economic and financial conditions. International organizations and their local partners that aimed to help women made them fall into the trap of small loans, limiting them to typical gendered professions such as sewing and hairdressing with no sustainable or long-term solutions and reforms. Privatization also had a severe impact on women, as they were the first to be let go when privatized organizations laid off employees, which led them in many cases to accept very low wages and no benefits to remain in their jobs. The level of awareness surrounding economic rights among feminist and women's associations was varied; however, the action

towards transforming these economic realities was extremely minimal across the board, and remains so today.

It is important to note that the Palestinian feminist associations were aware of the existing intersections between women's liberation and economic and civil rights early on. The Palestinian associations linked women's empowerment, freedom and work to economic policies and adopted a series of practices and projects that embody this approach. The reason behind this progressive approach was the existing cohesion between decision-making bodies and the grassroots communities in Palestinian camps.

*“Many associations are not aware of the economic issues and are not exposed to conferences such as the Davos Conference. Most of these associations are humanitarian and social-oriented, they avoid any interference with the personal status codes and the economic policies in fear of clashing with the political authorities. In general, the knowledge production and dissemination of these issues in Lebanon remain weak, and despite some minimal attempts from the side of Women's Council, the ground for change is still not ready and not prepared,”* notes Batoul Yahfoufi

There was a lack of coordination between the organizations that are concerned with economic rights and women's rights associations. An activist mentioned that when she asked an economist to hold sessions for women about the country's economy, he refused, saying “Please, I don't want to deal with women”, indirectly stating that economy is not a women's issue or a feminist concern. It is also important to mention that in 1994, Iqbal Doughan established the “League of Working Woman,” in collaboration with women activists and women working in different fields. The League contributed to changes in the labor law, advancing gender equality in the workplace and in prohibiting the arbitrary release of pregnant women from their jobs. It also



worked towards extending maternity leave and the inclusion of children as social beneficiaries if the mother is the only family member on a social protection scheme.<sup>6</sup>

### **In the Realm of “NGO-ization”?**

*“In order to address the many causes and issues at hand, it was necessary for activists to work in full-time positions, and therefore there was a need for financial compensation. We had to endorse projects and to enter into the realm of NGO work.” - Zoya Rouhana*

The Beijing conference impacted the agendas of global donors, and its recommendations were bound to become the headlines under which feminist movements around the globe organized their projects and activities. The post-Beijing phase led to an organizational shift resulting in the proliferation of small to medium sized associations instead of big organizations and bodies, in what was called “NGOization” or the dominance of institutional and organizational work. NGOization is a concept that was used by Islah Jad in 2003 to describe the Arab women’s movement after 2001. Dalia Mitri<sup>7</sup> also referred to it when describing the Lebanese activist scene in particular. It is worth noting that most of the activists who addressed this transformation expressed some sadness at the disappearance of volunteering, which no longer exists as it did before. Nevertheless, they acknowledged the current circumstances that necessitated this type of transformation, and the need to focus on working essential tasks, which require employment, and thus financing, in order to remain sustainable and meet needs.

<sup>6</sup> An interview conducted with Iqbal Doughan and from an article by Rouba Abou Amo about the activism of Iqbal Doughan through the link: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> - إقبال دوغان - في شارع اللبنايات

<sup>7</sup> <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/> - من الفضاء العام - إلى المكاتب - تحوّل الحركات النسائية في لبنان - إلى طابع المنظمات - غير الحكومية

“There is a difference between an organization and an association.

Organizations are usually based on the concept of membership, but today we have associations that have 10 to 15 employees at most, and here we are talking about women employees, not about women members or volunteers. It cannot be said that it is a negative transformation, but the activist commitment and the ability to mobilize and recruit weakened in front of the funded projects.

*The funding deceived many and now every association is concerned with the success of its own work, and competing to obtain funding.” – Joumana Merhi*

As for Aziza Al Khalidi, she drew attention to the fact that “access to resources controls one’s ability in elevating voices. The movement has become more specialized and responsive, which is positive. But there has been competition, crowding and fragmentation at some point. These institutions are meant to be avant-garde and their discourse should be more intertwined, despite the competition and the difference in views.”

Caroline Succar notes that the new approach adopted by associations gave more space for young voices, collective decisions and the exchange of ideas. However, it has taken away a part of the pure activist spirit that was based on passion and commitment, both stemming from a feminist ideology.

*“In the past, the feminist voice was louder than the voice of the funder. Today, we have less hierarchy more collective work, but the movement has lost many elements of passion and volunteerism.” – Caroline Succar*

### **Feminism in Lebanon’s 1990s: Founding and Transformative Paradoxes**

The 1990s were transformative but incomplete for re-creating the feminist movement in its ultimate form and sense. There was a possibility for the movement to be momentous and reactive as much as there was a possibility to

make it aware, sustainable, networked, and attentive. The movement went in both directions, albeit to varying extents. However, this does not negate the enormous efforts made by the women's movement in reforming the trajectory of women's human rights and making space for its feminism in fields concerning legal issues and women's livelihoods. It was a decade that impacted the commitment the feminists had towards the causes they believe in and the period that ignited their awareness and consciousness. Perhaps we can describe the nineties they lived through as a stage of "clash" and "emergence". On the one hand, there are the feminists who clashed with the violent legacy of war, unfair legislations, the shrinking reality of unions' movements, the politicized collectives, the authoritarian patriarchal parties, and some of the complicit voices among them. On the other hand, these women activists worked hard to initiate a self-renaissance whose features are inspired by the convergence of the world's feminists in Beijing, as well as by local feminists' lived experiences, their needs, and mainly their persistence on shaking off a collective memory tainted by violence and conflict.

Dreaming and working in Lebanon as a woman, an activist and a feminist for justice and equality was not an easy journey in the nineties. It was hard to do so in the nineties, in the aftermath of a civil war that destroyed ideas, institutions, human and legal values, before it destroyed buildings and cities. It remains a difficult path to forge today, especially as Lebanon's economy is collapsing, and the country is falling deeper into the abyss. My last question for the feminists I interviewed was whether they are more optimistic today than they were in the nineties. Some of the answers were tinged with positivity and hope; however, their main takeaway was an increased optimism for the feminist movement itself but much less so for the country. They asked how one can be optimistic under such circumstances when the feminist movement is, once again, performing a humanitarian role that resembles its role during the civil war; far removed from all the small victories, achievements and legal

reforms that were carved out in the nineties, shaped through strength and pain and in spite of a sectarian, corrupt, and negligent regime.