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## **Feminist Consciousness in Nineties Lebanon: A Journey of Discovery, Hope, and Transformations**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This essay is a personal reflection on feminism in Lebanon during the nineties, a post-war decade which was characterized by a confluence of critical landmarks. Indeed, the nineties was a decade of significant changes in Lebanon. It heralded the end of a long destructive civil war and a period of both hope and uncertainties. Changes were significant and at the same time brutal. The repercussions and long-term impact of these changes were hardly envisaged back then, save by some early warnings of the possible cataclysmic effects of the major decisions made at the time, and essentially in relation to reconstruction and the financial and economic architecture of Lebanon.

The post-war decade appeared to recognize and consequently provide space for the critical role that a very diverse civil society had played and its subsequent re-positioning in the post-war era. Civil society at this stage included (and still includes) a significant number of organisations affiliated to state figures, to political parties as well as those who identified themselves as being secular and independent. Notwithstanding the presence of the well-resourced sectarian civil society during that era, the sector was characterized by three vibrant social movements, at least two of which had played a significant role during the long years of the war. I mean here the women's movement, the disability movement and the environmental movement.

In this essay, I will be looking specifically at the women's movement (i.e. consisting of organisations led by women and working on one or more issues related to women) and the feminist movement (i.e. consisting of groups with a clear and transformative feminist discourse) as important actors and protagonists during the nineties. My emphasis is on the ways in which feminist struggles were identified, framed and addressed during that particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Carla Akil for her work on the citations and bibliography in this paper.

interesting decade. I attempt to explore the how and why of key feminist demands that featured intensively during that post-war decade, namely women's political participation, the demand for an egalitarian civil family law and ending violence against women. The first two of these demands have long been on the agenda of the women's movement, with the existence of literature and testimonies indicating that they were sporadically debated during the war. However, the issue of violence against women was decidedly a feature of the nineties. In doing so, I explore the effect and influence of the possibilities and tangible opportunities created by the end of the war, namely in terms of the regional feminist connections which flourished during that period and the setting up of the early Arab feminist networks, as well as the impact of the UN IVth Conference on Women. Otherwise known as the Beijing conference, it took place in 1995, after an intensive period of preparation and consultations amongst women and feminist organisations in Lebanon and in the region.

My essay includes a brief overview of what we know of the women's movement before and during the civil war (1975-1990) in an attempt to understand the factors and actors which shaped to some extent the movement during the nineties. It then goes to reflect on that decade based on personal encounters and engagements, my own earlier writings and record books, articles in the media, literature review of some of the existing grey and published literature in addition to data, testimonials and narratives collected from 2012 till 2014. I have done these interviews with feminists from 5 Arab countries, including Lebanon, who were active during the period extending between the sixties and the nineties. These were conducted while I was then a PhD candidate working on a research which attempted to analyse the feminist movements in 5 countries in the MENA region. These transcribed interviews have not been used before and I will only be using brief descriptions of my interviewees rather than their actual names.

## **The pre-war women movement in Lebanon: patchy, selective and shy**

It is safe to say that there is very little scholarly writing or proper archival material on the historicity of the women and feminist movement in pre-war Lebanon. When referring to this particular period in history, the literature often cites a series of changes in the letter of the law which have certainly influenced some aspects of the lives of some women. I cite here as an example the right of Lebanese women to vote (1952), the right of Christian Lebanese women to equal inheritance (1959) as well as other minor legal reforms which impact has been modest if any in contributing to transformation in the lived experiences of women and girls. Interestingly, this period is rather rife with citations of and references to individual women who have been visible in specific fields of action where they have made individual and rather lasting marks. I cite here for instance the work of Anbara Salam Khalidi (1897-1986) in promoting girls' education, Anissa Najjar (1913-2016) in emphasizing the importance of livelihood and economic activity especially amongst rural women, Mounira Solh (1911-2010) and Zalfa Chamoun (1900-1987) in instituting services for children with disabilities, May Arida (1926-2018) and Saloua Raouda (1916-2017) in spearheading the role of culture and the arts in addition to the work of pioneer lawyer, Laure Moughayzel (1929-1997) whose influence continued throughout the war and until her passing away in 1997. This is certainly not an exhaustive list but only seeks to highlight ways in which individual women played significant roles during that era at least in visibilising what was referred to as "the woman's question" in most conservative discourses.

Whilst each of these women left indeed a mark in fields which were either non-existent or exclusive to men, their legacy is certainly a personal one, often borne of individual interests as well as the material and social status that

provided them with the edge and possibility to be present and vocal in the public sphere.

Finally, that era witnessed the creation of the first “organisations of women” and which remain operational to date, namely the League for Lebanese Women’s Rights (1947). The League was and remains under the tutelage of the Lebanese Communist Party and subsequently the Lebanese Women’s Council (1952) which was an umbrella of charitable women organisations including faith based as well as politically affiliated outfits. Both organisations will surface back to life in the nineties and mostly in the midst of the preparations for the Beijing Conference of 1995.

### **The civil war years: Engaging in emergency relief and attempts at peace making**

The civil war years created and normalized a new situation where violence, divisions and lawlessness prevailed. Despite this turbulent and gory period, the activity of women organisations was to some extent prominent. Early on during this period, a number of new women organisations were formed, notably the Lebanese Democratic Women Gathering (1976) as well as the Palestinian Najdeh Association (1976). Political parties and militias active during that period also formed various kinds of “women branches” which later morphed into registered organisations known as the Lebanese Association for Human Rights. The period also witnessed the emergence of one of the early human rights organization calling for the end of the war and for civil peace and led by Moghaizel. Many of the reforms in the letter of the law that took place prior to the war can largely be attributed to Moghaizel.

Too many of these organisations, and as per many personal communications and testimonials I have collected over the years, the priority was first and

foremost to attend to the humanitarian needs of the affected population, especially women. As such, organisations which were created on the basis of their concern with women's rights and participation, such as the two cited above, saw themselves overwhelmed by relief actions including the distribution of food and basic necessities, provision of shelters, short term income generation for women, and the provision of other basic services namely education for young children and access to essential health services.

Despite the abundant writings that characterize this period, both by local and international authors and scholars, little is recorded about the specific lived experiences of women during the brutal and long Lebanese civil war. As such, we have little if any data or accounts to rely on in an effort to understand the ways in which women's roles changed especially with the increase in the number of women headed households, how did women experience and deal with war trauma, how did they negotiate with their families and with their communities at large, and what forms of violence they were subjected to, in both the private and in the public sphere. The actual lived experiences of women during the war remains to be uncovered save for sparse testimonials by former women fighters amongst the ultra-right militias (e.g. Marie Kossayfi and Jocelyne Khoueiri) as well as second hand stories about women who fought with the various Palestinian factions and the biography of former communist fighter and prisoner Soha Bishara. In any case, the accounts of ordinary women and girls during the war have yet to be captured. One of the very few such memoirs to be written and published is probably that of Jean Said Makdissi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*, which was released in 1990, almost immediately after the end of the war.

## **1990 onwards: dealing with post-war, changing mind-set and defining “recovery”**

I have deliberately opted to use the term “post-war” rather than peace. The recent events of 2019 and 2020 as well as the developments we witnessed during the last three decades following the end of the civil war clearly indicate that whilst the guns have quieted down, at least temporarily, qualifying this period as a time of “peace” is largely inaccurate.

With the official end of the war in 1990 and the adoption of the Taef agreement, a new era begun especially for women groups and organisations. Indeed, the world had changed during the war period when women and other groups were forced to engage on emergency and relief as well as survival. With this new era, healing, understanding and learning were largely overlooked in favor of moving forward, rebuilding and looking ahead.

This notwithstanding, I will highlight the main features of feminism in the nineties. Whereas these particular features may be factual, interpreting them and constructing them into a picture of the decade is more of a subjective and individual endeavor. I see these moments as personal and lived experiences. The way I interpret them now may be different than in real time and certainly benefits from the precious advantage of hindsight. This interpretation remains nevertheless very much personal.

### ***The Taef agreement: an arrangement amongst men in charge***

The Taef agreement, otherwise referred to as the National Reconciliation Accord, was agreed and sealed following a series of negotiations amongst war lords and political leaders culminating in the signature of the accord in Taef in October 1989 and a parliamentary endorsement in November 1989. Even though the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 will not see the light till ten



years after, the Taef agreement is a case in point of the total absence of women from discussions around the end of conflict and the terms of the peacebuilding, reconstruction and recovery era. A women and feminist agenda was thus nowhere to be found in these discussions which turned out not to have any impact on improving the lives and experiences of women and girls. This serious omission was further exacerbated by the Lebanon Amnesty law of 1991 (law 84/91) and which effectively exonerated militias (essentially men) from their war crimes and integrated them in the country's regular armed forces. The extent to which armed militia used rape as a weapon of war during that period will never be known. Only erratic accounts and testimonials exist with some of the survivors being too scared to take the matter further at a time when there was no possibility of accessing any form of justice. In a number personal communications that I have gathered, women carried the trauma of sexual assault throughout their lives. At the same time, they feared both stigma as well as occasional encounters with their rapists who were still at large having benefited from the infamous post-war amnesty law. Indeed, the closure of the war chapter and the amnesia had to happen even if this meant not recognizing the various forms of physical and sexual violence that women had endured in many parts of the country. The silencing of the suffering of women during the war is a trauma that we will collectively carry from the nineties and until the present day.

### ***Violence against women becomes a public and political issue***

One of the main turning points of the nineties is the framing and catapulting, perhaps for the first time, of the discourse on violence against women as an issue for debate within the public domain. This was a significant breakthrough and rather ironic, given that violence against women in the private and public sphere endured during the war was hardly a subject of debate and interest. The nineties were significant as they witnessed the formation of the first

women organization with a specific remit to combat and criminalize violence against women.

The first such organization was the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women and which was created in 1996 following several years of public activism, mobilization and media engagement for the first time in Lebanon. The backlash was considerable as many segments of society rejected even the possibility of the topic becoming an issue of social dialogue. Domestic violence and marital rape were perceived as matters which are entirely relegated to the sacrosanct boundaries of the private domain. Pioneer feminists such as Zoya Rouhana and Iqbal Doughan were perhaps amongst the first to speak in public about the duty of the state to protect women from violence especially in the private domain, the need to enact civil laws to this affect and thus free the private domain from the control and oversight of religious laws. It took in fact more than two decades for a law to protect women from domestic violence to be issued in 2014 (law 293) albeit with serious gaps and following relentless activism and advocacy which can be rightfully traced back to the nineties.

Despite its shortfalls, Law 293 is a reflection of solid, continuous, well argued, and determined feminist activism which took shape and form at the beginning at the nineties. What prompted a handful of feminist activists to take a stand on this issue and transform it into their life struggle is a matter that requires and is worthy of serious investigation. According to the testimony of one of the feminists of that decade, she notes that “we knew that almost everybody will be against us... politicians, the public... the media... even fellow women’s rights activists... but we had to poke the devil... women are suffering on a daily basis... this must stop.”

Reflecting on the why and how of this important breakthrough that took place in the early nineties and which shifted the issue of violence against women into the public and political domains requires from us an in-depth analysis of the combined impact of the advent of the Beijing conference in 1995 (see section below), the end of the war and the availability of space for civil action, and the opening of connections with feminists throughout the region as well as globally. As we contemplate current debates in 2020 on issues such as marital rape, sexual harassment, consent, violence against sex workers, migrant workers, refugee women, LGBTQ women and all women and girls, it is important to remember that the development and maturity of such debates would have probably not been possible had it not been for these historical moments in the early nineties and onwards.

Changing ways of working and a broad agenda for reform and democratisation  
Having had little role and influence as movers and shakers during the war time, feminist activists and feminist organisations in the nineties became more vocal and visible. For many, the nineties heralded a break with the 15 years spent in doing relief and humanitarian work. Strategies used may have been different and often at odds, yet, most feminist activists identified political lobbying, engaging in political life, influencing the media and campaigning as the most effective to be used.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is indeed easy to critique such methods and their underlying assumptions. Indeed, and same as with the emerging disability and environment movements, feminist activists in their most part chose to engage with the state apparatus, namely NCLW, lobby for legal reforms which in fact place the state as a duty bearer vis-à-vis women and girls. Feminist organisations mainly engaged with the then state as a peer and from a position of legitimate rights holder who perceive the rights of women as part and parcel of the post-war reform and recovery. Two demands by feminists

were quite prominent, namely the reform of family laws and women's participation in political life which were both seen as the necessary features of a modern, secular post-war Lebanon.

In an effort to sugar coat the demand for civil family laws, a segment of the feminist movement chose to call for an "optional civil marriage." Though this demand was diluted and even insignificant and meaningless, it caused much ire amongst religious institutions which called for their followers to take on the streets in defense of religion and against the secularization of society. Whilst an egalitarian family law has yet to materialize, mobilization around it in the nineties has probably normalized it as a key demand of several independent feminist organisations, a matter that remains true to this date.

### ***The UN IVth Conference on Women (Beijing 1995)***

The buzz and excitement created by the UN IVth Conference on women and the ripple effect that it generated cannot be over-emphasized. By 1993, both the women's movement and the Lebanese state had vested interest in actively participating in the event which promised to be significant in size and impact. Following a rather long coordination and consultation process, a joint official and NGO report was presented and submitted to the Beijing conference. Whereas this was a rather unusual and bizarre occurrence, it was nevertheless presented by the state as a positive achievement where both CSOs and the state agree on single document. This was never to be repeated again as the National Women Machinery which was put in place after the Beijing conference (see subsequent section) showed limited inclination and desire to purposefully engage with independent civil society and as such, adopt a less conservative discourse.

In addition, the amalgamation of the official and civil society positions vis-à-vis the rights of women was indeed an anomaly and reflected a situation where

there are no independent (non-state related) women organisations. This notwithstanding, and as indicated earlier, the Beijing conference had far reaching impact, which extends till today.

The effervescence of activities in preparation for the conference and the organization of the regional preparatory conference in Amman in September 1994 provided an amazing opportunity for feminist activists and groups from Lebanon to link and engage with sisters from the region, a matter which was quasi-impossible during the war save amongst political parties. New ways of working emerged, notably the creation of feminist regional networks where feminist organisations from Lebanon played a significant role in shaping their vision and activities. Chief amongst these is undoubtedly the Arab Women Court, a network of Arab feminist (and mostly secular and independent) organizations which focused on the issue of violence against women. The network organized a number of mock hearings which included testimonials of women victims and survivors of domestic violence. The hearing, which was organized in Beirut just three months prior to and in preparation for the Beijing conference (June 1995), was the first of its kind where women spoke of their own experiences of living with intimate partner violence whilst the final statement of the event criticized the inertia of Arab states in fulfilling their responsibilities vis-à-vis women and failing to take appropriate measures related to legal reforms and protection.

Though the Arab Women Court no longer exists, its creation as part of the preparations for the Beijing conference was a powerful turning point in making violence against women a key issue to be addressed by the feminist movement. The Beijing conference created additional spaces and opportunities for regional collaboration, for addressing critical issues of importance to the feminist movement, for learning from the global feminist movement, for accessing

resources, for compiling data, research and arguments and for strategizing beyond the Beijing conference.

### ***The National Commission for Lebanese Women or the beginning of state co-optation***

In 1998, law 720 framed the creation of the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), otherwise known in its generic name as the National Women Machinery. Initially it was conceived of as a state apparatus which would serve as a link between civil society and the state, amplify the voice of civil society and influence state decisions in favor of the rights of women as well as the implementation of the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW). However, almost immediately, the NCLW morphed into yet another state apparatus which pretty much mirrors the composition of the political system and is concerned over all by maintaining the status quo.

Immediately after its set up, and after it took its current shape after the Beijing conference of 1995, NCLW was quick to demonstrate that it is not ready or willing to take on the main battles for the rights of women in Lebanon. As such, it strategically shied away from addressing any of the key issues that would make a difference in women's lives, as framed in the nineties, namely around family law reforms, combatting all forms of violence against women and lifting all reservations on CEDAW.

In many a meeting, members of the NCLW, nominated by the president and the prime minister, clearly indicated that certain "sensitive issues". The reform of family laws, for instance, were beyond the remit of the NCLW and can only be discussed by "the three presidents" (meaning here the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House). It took in fact some three decades for the discourse of the NCLW to shift slightly to embrace

certain issues rather selectively, namely partial reforms on labor laws and the penal code, violence against women, child marriage and other specific demands which remain partial and where NCLW continues to claim imaginary victories. Some issues remain taboo such as the rights of LGBTQI, the secularization of family laws, lifting reservations on CEDAW and full equality in conferring nationality.

As NCLW gained visibility and considerable resources in the nineties, it also began to show signs which are reminiscent of state feminism in many of the neighboring countries in the region. These include but are not restricted to lack of transparency and accountability vis-à-vis women and independent feminist organisations, heavy handed competition for funding from multilateral, bi-laterals, international organization and any other donor institution, selective choice of issues to address and a ubiquitous representation in international fora whilst sidelining the presence, representation and voice of independent civil society organisations. It is safe to say that this situation prevails to this date.

### ***Ratification of CEDAW – 1997... but... with significant reservations***

The Lebanese Parliament ratified the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) in 1997. Mindful of the interests of religious and sectarian institutions, the Parliament nevertheless placed significant reservations on the Conventions mostly in relation to family laws, the right to confer nationality and the right to choose a family name. At the time, the Lebanese parliament included one woman, Nayla Moawad, wife of former assassinated president Rene Moawad. Moawad, who was later to become the first woman candidate to the Presidency in 2008, had indicated her support to the rights of women in Lebanon.

In a subsequent conference at the American University in Beirut (1997), Moawad noted that she was instrumental to the ratification of CEDAW by the Lebanese Parliament describing her method as that similar to the Trojan Horse where she surreptitiously used subterfuge to sneak the Convention on the agenda of the session and have it ratified without much awareness by her colleagues. Moawad was to be immediately challenged by one of the well-known feminist lawyers of the nineties who retorted “Madam MP, the Greeks had a plan when they brought the stratagem of the Trojan Horse...what was yours? What will you do now? How will you lift the reservations? How will you make the Convention operational and meaningful to women?” (personal notes and records, 1997).

To this date, the official reports submitted by the consecutive Lebanese governments to the cyclical CEDAW committee meetings in Geneva remain by and large removed from the lived realities of women in Lebanon while at the same time boasting imaginary achievements. The contribution of feminists in the nineties, despite the tensions and the fragmentation is to claim the Convention as a framework for gender equality and claim both space and voice during the CEDAW commission meetings in Geneva and present a counter-narrative which is often used as a basis to question the Lebanese state with regards to its performance in making CEDAW a reality for women.

### **The history of women and feminism in Lebanon: a story which has yet to be written**

We may need to resign to the idea that it will be very difficult if not impossible to gather, consolidate and reconstruct the story of the women’s movement in Lebanon. A part of this history has certainly disappeared and there is indeed a dearth of accessible archival material and most of the protagonists are not with us anymore. It is my strong belief that the nineties are a good if not the best



place to start. Many of the feminist activists who have framed the narrative and the struggles during that extraordinary period are still present with many even still active in one form or the other. In addition, and as I have tried to show in the earlier section, the period is characterized by burgeoning mobilizations, regional and global connections, as well as the emergence of new issues of concerns and new and unconventional ways of working. Whilst many researchers might have focused on the fragmentation, tension and competition within the feminist movement of that period, it will be quite interesting to further the search, questioning and reflections over the various shifts and breakthrough that were taking place despite the imperfections of the feminist movement of the nineties.

### **The personal is political**

In writing this short essay, I was constantly cognizant and mindful about my own positionality and intimate relation to that particular decade. Indeed, the late eighties represent my shift from academia as a professional path to feminist and social activism. I was amongst those who bore witness to that post-war decade and have strong and close personal connections and history with many of the feminists of that period and have been involved in many of the events which have shaped that period. I am aware that this has influenced my analysis and my narrative of that period and the ways in which I interpret the narratives and writings of others.

In fact, my personal interest in engaging in this essay comes from my own desire to contribute to the reconstruction of our feminist contemporary past, understand the intricate local, regional and global interconnectedness and reflect over our feminist history and its key landmarks and turning points.

Looking back and looking forward to what feminism has meant and will mean is likely to continue to guide my feminist journey whilst celebrating the learning, the failures and the achievements.

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