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Sites of Resistance: Women's Activism in Lebanon under Neoliberal Reform in the 1990s

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The Setting

This paper will discuss the neoliberal changes that took place in Lebanon after the civil war as narrated by three women and shed the light on their experiences as activists during that period of time. In 1990, Lebanon officially ended 15 years of civil war and entered a new era of post war reconstruction. This phase was widely associated with the process of neo-liberalization introduced by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri whose views were influenced by global templates of neoliberal urbanism, currency management and privatization (Baumann, 2017). Indeed, Lebanon has always had a free market economy, but the rise of Hariri to power and his beginning years of rule in 1992 signaled a radical intensification of neoliberal policies and their integration into various aspects of social life. In a broader context, Naomi Klein (2007) in her book "The Shock Doctrine" talks about how social breakdowns are essential to the free-market project and exposes the striking similarities between the neoliberal economic policies implemented in Chile, Iraq, Russia etc. Lebanon, similar to many other developing countries, experienced a neoliberal wave that was dictated by international institutions whose policies still impact our lives today.

Rafik Hariri entered the political sphere during the 1980s, as truce negotiations were being held to put an end to a dreadful civil war. At that time, he had established close relations with regional and international actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and France, who correspondingly supported and pushed for his election as Prime Minister after the war. Moreover, Baumann (2017) explains that the considerable power Prime Minister Hariri gained post-war tells us a lot about the changes that were occurring in Lebanon at the time. In addition to using his wealth for political influence, Hariri and his supporters continuously advocated that the adoption of neoliberal reforms will ensure Lebanon's re-insertion into the global developmental track that had bypassed the country

during the war. Consequently, his selection as prime minister was also a representation of the people's hope for a social and economic upturn, indicating that ideology also played a significant part in welcoming Hariri's plans and pushing forward the reconstruction project.

In line with this argument, Timothy Mitchell (1999) describes neoliberalism as the triumph of 'political imagination' (p.455). The success of neoliberalism depends on people's willingness to accept promises of a better economic future. At that time, Hariri took advantage of people's willingness to accept reform in the promise of prosperity and security, a sense that was lost during the long sectarian conflict. He then advertised his neoliberal project based on the assumption that this will eventually bring about long-term stability and economic prosperity. Although Hariri was not a traditional militia leader, he also took part in reproducing sectarianism through providing services and appealing to the Sunni community in order to win elections, especially at the end of the 1990s (Baumann, 2017). In addition to that, the planning process was marked by the "exceptional" circumstances produced by the civil war, which allowed a small group of elites to control the institutions tasked with the reconstruction process. By basing it on models, imported from cities in the West and the Gulf, Hariri appeared to be a key agent of modernization with his "vision" of rebuilding Beirut (ibid.). However, at the same time, concerns and growing criticism voiced by city planners, trade unions and leftist movements warned against Hariri's project.

Here, I am influenced by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2013) theorization of neoliberalism and how it reflects strongly on the neoliberal post-war model in Lebanon. In her essay "Transnational Feminist Crossings", Mohanty explains that the neoliberal project by the state facilitates mobility and cosmopolitanism for some eco-privileged individuals at the expense of impoverished

communities. Similarly, the reform era in Lebanon did not mark the end of the war, but a mere extension of conflict in the form of socio-economic and political violence against citizens, particularly vulnerable groups. Mohanty (2003) also helps us think more broadly about cross-cultural feminist work and how it should be attentive to the micropolitics of the context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macro-politics of the global economic and political systems and processes. Therefore, in order to understand these broad transformations and refigured relations of the state, market and civil society, this essay investigates sites of resistance, highlighting women's activism in the form of social care and political protest as crucial sites for the construction of knowledge, communities and identities as well as social care. Sites of resistance include the embodied practices and active resistance of women participating in more than one struggle defined by class and gender inequalities.

In Lebanon's complex post-war environment, this allows us to highlight the challenges the women face when they exercise their agency through activism and civic engagement in a neoliberal landscape and how political power has manifested itself in various forms to penetrate every corner of their lives. In this context, state-led neoliberalism has often relied on people to take the state's place in providing support to one another to allow the diffusion of responsibility where profit is prioritized over the basic needs of citizens. This system has also adopted gendered mechanisms to deter women's participation in the political sphere and control civil society organizations, thus empowering already existent patriarchal structures in society.

The Interview

My research is based on a semi-structured interview done through a group video call with women involved in activism during and after the civil war in

Lebanon, followed by an individual follow-up on specific questions. Elham, Feryal and Rajaa are now in their mid to late 50s, they met when they were located in West Beirut during the civil war, "Gharbieh" part of Beirut, as Elham noted, adding that this is "a terminology our civil war memory is stuck with." They have been close friends ever since, especially through their involvement with leftist movements and feminist organizations. As the women were narrating their stories, several discussions would take place about their collective struggle in the face of neoliberal transformation and political repression. In particular, they speak of a turning point in Lebanon's history as the sectarian political leaders and economic elites began to violently co-opt social movements and trade unions who challenged their post-war policies. It was at this point that the women began to realize that the system cannot be removed as a whole through protesting, so they started looking for alternative ways to achieve their demands through their participation in civil society.

I was interested in learning about how women are affected by the ways political, social, and economic power are practiced under neoliberalism and the role of agency during the period of transformation in the 1990s. I also wanted to shed the light on how the nature of the women's involvement shifted in the post-war period through referring back to their experiences during the civil war. Needless to say, I do not intend for this essay generalize all women's experiences during and after the civil war in Lebanon. It is based on experiences particular to the women interviewed, yet it gives us an interesting idea of the memories and experiences of leftist women who were active during the 1990s.

The Stories

All three women had long histories of involvement with civil society organizations and leftist movements. They were primarily engaged in the social

sector through medical assistance and distribution of aid during the 80's wars in a period of war, state absence and wide-scale population impoverishment. While some of these embodied practices of solidarity and care in neighborhoods or cities were carried by women to the post-war period, there was an evident shift to political activism and resistance of the post-war neoliberal model and state. By opening narratives about resistance, I aim to show how women were not only able to organize and build support networks to help others, but also how they strengthened and pushed themselves to discover capacities that ensure both their emotional and physical survival in a period of instability.

All three women had long histories of involvement with civil society organizations and leftist movements. First of all, the term "civil society" has been used loosely over the years, in which the distinction between what is considered public and private has not been clearly defined. This reveals the complex nature of the term which rests on how it is perceived and contextualized by the person defining it. Elham begins with clarifying that her definition of civil society combines both non-profit organizations and political parties. She explained that the bottom-up approach to party building resembles the foundations civil society organizations rest upon. In this case, they both are able to represent the interest of a particular group, noting that citizens during the civil war joined left or right-wing political parties at their own will and based on a set of beliefs. Also, Elham's definition aims to resist the gendered distinction that often associates men with the public and women with the private. This reflects on Suad Joseph's (1997) explanation that the boundaries between state, civil society, and kinship or the private domain are highly fluid and gendered. So, the issue of exclusion of women from the state has been heightened by the attempt to separate these domains – state, civil society and kinship, constraining women to the private domain. Accordingly, Elham creates a space for an alternative representation through combining

both the public and private domains when defining civil society.

The experiences of these different women were sometimes individual, sometimes collective, and to an extent involves political participation. Here, it is important to note this type of mobilizing and exercising agency must be informed by a mapping of power relations and the multiple positioning of women, particularly that of gender, ideology, family and their surrounding environment. From the start of the civil war, the homes and surroundings of women became sites of struggle as the private and public merged, and they felt threatened inside their houses as much as they would be walking the streets. However, at the same time, they found refuge in other activities as they became engaged in creating cross-sector networks and new models of cooperation among themselves and their community.

In the context of war

The women were primarily involved in caregiving activities during the civil war, specifically throughout the 80s period in the midst of an Israeli invasion. They supported each other and their surrounding communities and ended up creating a tight-knit friendship group during the toughest time of their lives. This provided them with necessary strength to carry on with life-saving work and encouraged them to collectively think of an alternative future. Towards the end of the war, along with social work, they began to shift towards political activism and then finally moved to focus on specific social issues with civil society organizations.

Elham explains that she is part of a group that was organized under the Lebanese Women Collective (تجمع المرأة اللبنانية). During the war, they took care of internally displaced people from the South who were seeking refuge in Beirut. They distributed food, supplied medicine, performed first aid, and carried out

awareness campaigns related to the environment. Similarly, Feryal was part of the Civil Defense first aid team during the civil war and onwards. She carried on with this line of work until she moved to the Lebanon Family Planning Association for Development and Family Empowerment (جمعية تنظيم الأسرة في لبنان). Finally, Rajaa was also involved in social work during the war and she is now part of the Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering(التجمع النسائي الديمقراطي اللبناني) who focus on matters pertaining to women and children. The women emphasize that money was never an issue during the war as they received enough funds from external donors, NGOs (Non-Government Organizations), leftist political parties and Palestinian factions. However, reflecting on the current multi-layered crisis Lebanon is going through as well as the intensification of neoliberal economic policies, Elham explains that they have not been receiving sufficient funds to help people in need. Previously, the war did not create any barriers to receiving funds, whereas Elham's organization and many others today have been having troubles in accessing their resources and receiving sufficient donations due to the current banking crisis in Lebanon and several global factors. So, in the context of war, women decided to focus on social work as part of their activism and recognized it as necessary and urgent at that time. On this matter, Rajaa stresses that she was not part of any armed resistance or the military field because she does not support violence and is "against the abolition of the other by violence."

This work carried on after the civil war and stopped at the beginning of 1990 when the Syrian occupation carried out massive persecution against Lebanese people who voiced opposition. Many women activists or their friends, neighbors and family members were faced with brutal repression such as receiving threats and being subjected to torture, abduction, and arrests. As a result, many activists including one of the women interviewed and her acquaintances were forced to temporarily leave their homes and relocate somewhere further

away to hide from the Syrian army. However, shortly after this period marked a turning point in the women's lives as there was a notable shift from social work to political activism.

Resisting neoliberalism and the state

Elham explains that in the immediate post-war period, before Hariri gained considerable power, a massive wave of protests hit the country. These protests were primarily marked by several union mobilizations, particularly when the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (GCLW) previously established in 1958, led a popular uprising in 1992 (Atallah, 2020). The nationwide protests, mainly due to the worsening of socioeconomic conditions and devaluation of the Lebanese pound in a context where citizens have not yet recovered from the ghosts of war, torture, abduction, and death, eventually led to the resignation of Omar Karami's cabinet. Note that these movements were not exclusively labor related, they included various groups that aimed to overthrow the system as a whole.

The women themselves also took part in organizing protests and sit-ins. The protests started off with demanding basic human rights, Elham explains that "towards the end of the war, the protests were not just to demand our rights as women, we were seeking our rights as human beings." She explains that they had to communicate with each other through friends to spread the word. They tried to reach out to everyone, which was initially successful, especially women from diverse political and cultural backgrounds because it was essential to bring everyone together to be able to organize and build a strong resistance.[1]

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[1] This reply was to a specific question I asked about recognizing diversity between women in society (whether the differences are due to socio-economic, religious, national factors…) at that time and how they managed to organize, which was inspired when Audre Lorde (1984) said "you do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other" (p.142) and argued that women needed to bring their whole selves to the movement and she

On that note, Rajaa stresses the importance of political participation by stating that "involvement in political parties should not carry negative implications, but it can be a way to challenge the system from within." She refers to how the National Movement (الحركة الوطنية) were keen on spreading critical awareness and consolidating their position in the ongoing regional struggle against new colonial projects and Zionism. Rajaa explains that their protests then shifted towards specific social issues, in which they began to protest violence against women, unemployment, the high cost of living accompanied with demands to increase the minimum wage and provide healthcare. She emphasizes the significant role that the Lebanese University played in these protests, with students and particularly women taking part in organizing them. In addition to supporting and participating in the protests mentioned above, the students would organize to voice out their concerns about educational matters, including demands to pay the teachers' salaries.

The wave of protests during the early 1990s continued as Hariri became the new Prime Minister in 1992 and neoliberal reconstruction policies began to increase disparities between the various segments in society. However, as put by Rajaa, this along with the Taif Agreement that was set in place 1989, was "nothing but a slap to our face, it was as if all our work in the previous years was lost in vain". Elham and Rajaa were actively involved in the organization of the protests and they dedicated their time to take the streets and voice out their demands for justice with hopes to change the entire political system. Hariri introduced a system that was very different to what they had aimed to achieve, but Rajaa insisted that they continued to work against all odds for social justice and resisted the ideologies that came with what she referred to as (الحقبة الحريرية).

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believed that difference, diversity and inclusion should be the lifeblood of the feminist movement, and for that matter any movement.

The Lebanese National Movement, including the Lebanese Communist Party, the Communist Action Organization, and other smaller leftist groups were aware of the pitfalls of Hariri's project and warned against it. For a period of time, they proceeded to hold public discussions to inform the community about the perils of neoliberal reforms and what they referred to as "the Globalization period". Rajaa and Elham explain that they took part in organizing these discussions, particularly about the role of Hariri, what he represents and the dangers of the project he is pushing forward. Much of the information shared was based on their knowledge and readings about regional and global political economy.

However, Hariri and his allies managed to make their project appealing to some of the working class, feeding them false promises of stability, economic prosperity, and social reconciliation. These promises were short lived, and at a later stage, the project appeared to be profit-oriented, with the benefits only limited to members of the government and their business associates. Here, Elham joins the discussion and refers to this era as "The Modern Middle Eastern Project, which entails the plan to spread neoliberalism in the entire Middle East and normalize relations with Israel". The process of neoliberalization was not unique to Lebanon, as the pattern was spreading throughout Arab countries in the region (MENA) and transformations were taking place in Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. That period of time was marked by a focus on economic power while the United States attempted to pursue an Arab-Israeli peace project in the MENA region (Baumann, 2017). In Lebanon, Hariri also relied on negotiations with Israel in hopes that a peace agreement will result in security, which failed later on.

Dismantling the movements and cooptation

During this period, the post-war confessional system, described by Bassel Salloukh as "a strong system that relied on clientelist institutions, used by the confessional elite to retain their respective communities" (Atallah, 2020), began to gain considerable power. The political elite began to dismantle the unions' organization through injecting a large number of ineffective unions until they successfully removed Elias Abu Rizq, who blamed the government for the increase in socioeconomic inequalities and rent-creating mechanisms, from his position as the GCLW president and replaced him with a candidate loyal to the political class, particularly to the Amal Movement. As described by Traboulsi (2014, p.63), "the trade union movement is like an empty shell" since most of the unions created during or after the war are constructed along sectarian and confessional lines and do not represent most of the workers. This was a governmental strategy to control the decision-making process and to strip the employees of any right to organize and voice discontent. Atallah (2020) also reported that this type of sabotage was not unique to this period of time, but it became systematic in the post-war period. The process, based on intimidation tactics, was in line with the Syrian regime support that did not tolerate any opposition from the workers'movement.

Afterwards, the women explain that the leftist political parties and movements began to lose their momentum. The public discussions were not held as frequent as before and their ideas were losing popularity among citizens. As described by Rajaa: "the decline in political debate undermined the individual and collective morale".[2] As a result, the Lebanese University students no longer

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[2] The exact phrase Rajaa used in Arabic is "الإفلاس الفكري هو الإفلاس المعنوي". The literal translation is "intellectual bankruptcy is the bankruptcy of morale," she uses this phrase to explain how the motivation to protest is driven by intellectual debates and ideas. However, once that is lost, the desire for change withers away with it.

organized protests and the activists "sense of belonging" to the cause began to fade. She explains that change requires political mobilization, concrete decision-making, and a clear cause. However, the political elite managed to divide citizens along sectarian lines through maintaining a system of patronage, the politics of fear and repression. Rajaa states that sectarian political parties managed to persuade several groups to protect themselves against a "lingering threat", employing the fear of sectarian "otherness".

NGO-ization of the women's movement

At that time, the women withdrew from protesting and political organizing as they began to lose hope in systematic change. Rajaa explains that she only kept herself politically informed through her readings, but her work mainly shifted to civil society organizations that focus on women's matters. All three women have been involved in civil society since then, Rajaa explains further that "we realized that we need to take a specialized and narrow orientation that focuses on specific issues rather than targeting the system as a whole".

In addition to taking over the decision-making in trade unions and banning protests, the state began to promote its interests and appropriate the struggle for justice through women's advocacy groups as a mechanism to de-politicize the women's movement. During the late 1990s, and as the neoliberal restructuring was starting to infiltrate more sectors, the government appointed a group of elite women based on their social status to manage women affairs in post-war development through the nationalized organization "National Commission for Lebanese Women" (NCLW). This includes overseeing women's NGOs in civil society and encouraging them to form relations with international agencies (El Hage, 2015). Although the NCLW has been actively advocating for women's rights, its top-down structure and inability to make any concrete decision reduces its role to function alongside the patriarchal and sectarian

state. The NCLW and its domestic partners act through forming cooperative and near conformist attitudes to the hierarchal market structure of neoliberalism that prioritizes external patronage and partnerships with prestigious establishments over grassroots organizing (ibid.). As a result, the main targets and projects will correspond to the international donor community more than the needs of local women. As put by Khattab (2010, p.91): "international aid agencies strengthen the corporatist rather than grassroots associations, contribute to marginalize women's interests and needs, and impede comprehensive reforms".

With reference to such NGOs, Rajaa says that they only "pretend to be civilized" when appealing to Western countries and through focusing on economic empowerment projects while women are still largely excluded from the political sphere and decision-making processes. To explain further, local and international organizations have focused on the shift towards women's involvement in economics. The neoliberal discourse portrays both women and men as rational economic actors and encourages women to enter the labor market. However, these incentives also rely on women's poorly compensated work in other, often informalized, domains resulting in exploitation and increasing class-based inequalities. Rajaa also explains that the NGOs put forward certain stereotypical images that women must abide with such as being "well-mannered and well-behaved, especially in front of a camera, in addition to promoting exclusive values and principles". She references Emile Durkheim to show how much society exerts a powerful influence on individuals and shapes the collective consciousness through norms, beliefs, and values. All of this contributed to perpetuating a new stereotype about women and their economic role in society.

Although Rajaa previously stated the important of political participation, the

patriarchal nature of the political system based on confessionalism, and controlled by male political elites and warlords, makes it difficult for women to assume decision-making positions. As Kirsten Schulze (1998) explains, the Lebanese society has prided itself on male leadership through the 'za'im 'who embodies the recognized masculine values of conquest, domination, competition and war. After taking on the position of a military leader during the civil war, he then returned to his traditional role, based on notions of social and political divisions, class privilege, or status. In addition, Elham, Rajaa and Feryal proclaim that they currently do not feel represented by women in the government who reached their positions through familial or social ties. Most women in Lebanese politics usually have very minimal impact on decision-making and instead work towards empowering already existent patriarchal structures.

Diverging Experiences

Although all three women share a similar ideological standpoint, their experiences differed based on the impact of the surrounding community, particularly the family. I explored with the three women how patriarchy affects women in a family setting. Similar to how Joseph theorizes the Arab family (1993), Elham explains that their struggle as women was not just limited to barriers set by the state, but also within the family itself. She continued to explain that patriarchy is not just limited to men in society "but also women and mothers who reproduce this system at home, especially when raising their children, and telling their daughters to behave differently than their sons. We all faced this with our mothers". When Elham began her political activism, her mother showed disapproval and would often worry about her safety. She was also hesitant to accept her daughter's presence as a female in these protests. However, since Elham's father was also involved with leftist political movements himself, she was encouraged to join these movements and take

part in protests without facing any major problems.

On the other hand, Rajaa explains that she had a more traditional and religious family who were completely against her presence on the streets, even if she told them it was only in the purpose of social work and not related to protests. She mentions that she used to sneak out of her house to go help or participate in protests; the three women giggled as they recalled memories of Rajaa climbing into her room from the balcony and rushing to get into her pajamas. Her mother, although showed great disapproval of these actions, would sometimes cover for Rajaa, and tell everyone else that she was still sleeping in her room. Finally, Feryal was not entirely involved in political activism as she was part of the Civil Defense team and attended first aid trainings at the center next to her house, and her parents approved because she was always close-by. She started becoming more politically involved at a later period, starting with the Umbrella March during the 2011 protests.

Reimagining the Future and Alternatives

Far from the promised restructuring and prosperity, the new economic model worsened the living conditions of many citizens in Lebanon after the civil war. The women's stories tell us about the changes resulting from neoliberal reforms under a repressive state apparatus that prioritizes profit over the well-being of citizens. In particular, Elham, Rajaa and Feryal have been participating in more than one struggle, including demanding access to healthcare, the job market, food security, and their rights as women. After the war, they saw the multitude of crises as a window of opportunity for social change. However, this later resulted in stolen moments of political sabotage and unexpected reconfigurations of dominant social and political arrangements. It is true that the Lebanese history is repeating itself in some ways, with periods of instability and the current economic crisis, but the

protests during the 1990s have left a remarkable impact on many citizens. Some of the initiatives gave activists the strength to reimagine their future and build on existing forms of protest in 2015 and more recently in 2019, from spontaneous grassroots mobilization, to workers organizing sit-ins, to women banging on pots and pans from their balconies and migrant workers protesting in front of embassies. The spontaneity of the recent 2019 protests encouraged the women to participate and voice out their demands again. Although their activism this time did not carry the same momentum that existed in the 1990s, it reminded them of the hope they had to overthrow the system and rebuild it along the lines of justice.

Although the women all share the vision of a socially just future, Elham and Rajaa express their desire to stay and continue the fight for more equal and inclusive policies in the future, while Feryal mentions that hanging on to the last thread of hope has been exceedingly difficult during the past years, particularly with the worsening economic crisis during 2020. She says, "I always had hope that change will take place, and at times I grasped onto that hope to keep myself going", but after the port blast on August 4th, 2020, the future seems to be only fueled with growing insecurity. This echoes the failure of the neoliberal economic model put forward by Hariri and his short-lived promises of "long-term prosperity and stability". And so, it is that after decades of struggle and trying to build hope, she is now encouraging her children to emigrate so she can join them and leave everything behind.

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