



What Remains: Eco-Feminist Pursuits

Developed and Edited: Knowledge Workshop

Introduction-Dialogue

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Introduction-Dialogue

Editorial Team

It is January 26, 2022. We are holding this conversation, as the editorial team, to set up an introduction that frames our work on the book, *What Remains: Eco-feminist Pursuits*. In this dialogue, we revisit the reasons that prompted us to investigate the interconnections between feminist and environmental issues. As we near the end of working on the book, we take this opportunity to examine the concepts and questions that guided our work. As a team, it is good for us to pause and reflect once again on the concept of ‘ecofeminism,’ what it means to us on political and personal levels, how it is addressed and reproduced in this book, and its significance in our current context. The editorial team has shared — and now we share with you — what we learned over the past months, what influenced us during our immersion in this project, and how the unfolding situation in Lebanon and around the world impacted the process of developing the book, and the texts themselves.

We start by asking: Why this book, and why now?

Deema Kaedbey: I will begin by noting that working on the question of environment, ecology, and ecofeminism has been a passion of mine for a long time. This interest grew over the years, sometimes taking directions that align with the work of the Knowledge Workshop (KW). In 2017-2018, in KW, we worked on oral histories of women in the environmental movement. And I became more convinced that the convergence of feminist and environmental concepts and movements offers a fruitful place to contemplate many crucial and relevant issues, such as our health, our bodies, the economy, and the natural world that is disappearing around us. And so I proposed that we address these issues in a new book.

When we issued the call for submissions of abstracts for this book, we made it clear that exploring parallels and mutualities between feminist and environmental movements does not mean focusing only on women's stories. At the same time, our approach makes an effort to listen to and document women's stories, and to comprehend and integrate their experiences within our body of knowledge. We wanted to undertake this issue on two overlapping levels: the systemic and the personal.

This book examines the interconnectedness of patriarchal, economic, and political institutions and how they feed off of one another. As we wrote in the call for abstracts: “These systems create social relations that glorify militarization, violent masculinities and individual and corporate profiteering; they devalue relations based on care and mutuality, they dismiss communities’ histories of land-based knowledge and sustenance, and they repress intuition and spirituality.”¹

On this level, the connection between feminist and ecological thought opens more space to raise concerns such as everyone's right to breathe clean air and drink clean water, as well as the right to access the coast and public areas. It also opens the door to practices such as asking older women about recipes based on local crops and their seasons, about the benefits of the plants and their healing traits, and about cultivation methods; highlighting this reciprocity between the two movements allows us to address issues of environmental racism, ecotourism, and an economy based on exploitation and greedy extraction of everything that the land produces.

All of these issues are intertwined with realities, experiences, choices, and crises that we face daily on personal and collective levels, prompting us to face up to questions like: where do we live, how do we live, and will we live? Will we make it? When we talk about nature, we are referring to the fact that humans are a part of nature; their health is tied to the health of trees and rivers, and vice versa. So, what is the relationship that we were able to develop with our environment, or that we were unable to develop because we were deprived of this environment, and thus, our relationship with nature became with the scorching heat, damaging rain, or poisonous waste?

Another facet of ecofeminism that allows for self-expression is "spirituality," which connects various levels of existence and experience together. Intuition, the sensorial, interconnectedness; interdependence with the earth and its creatures, seasons and changes, and also with our inner realms and with ourselves as part of the relationship with the outside and with everything around us—they are all part of spirituality. Some of these may be controversial in academic circles or in political organizing, but we recognize their significance.

¹ <https://www.alwarsha.org/call-feminism-ecology-eng/>

From another perspective, ecofeminism is a starting point for thinking about the ways in which different movements can feed and support one another. It is a long-term goal and we know it is not always easy, but we are proceeding with it, step by step. Our hope is that we pass it on as fundamental work for those who come after us, because it is a cumulative work, between groups, and between generations; and we too are building on people and groups who have made more space for connecting movements before us. I'll talk about this aspect of bringing together environmental and feminist groups later.

I should mention here that we were encouraged by the increased interest in environmentalism around us when we started thinking about and working on this book. The October 17 (2019) uprising may be a watershed moment: it was when the Marj Bisri case drew public attention, and the campaign succeeded in preventing the dam's development; there were more discussions about access to public areas and the right to access the beach. But I also recall the rallies against dam constructions years before; and of course, the 2015 protests known as "Tole'et Reehtkon/You Stink" were environmental protests in response to the trash crisis. I also sensed a growing interest in this issue within feminist groups in Lebanon, which strengthened my belief in the significance of deepening our knowledge as well as our interest through this book.

And in the end, I would like to think of this publication as the beginning of many subsequent projects and conversations on the interconnection between feminism and ecology. What is certain is that there is a global push to think about ecology and the Anthropocene (that is, the epoch in which humans are dominant and destroying the earth), in terms of climate change, and now with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the US, Australia, and elsewhere, I know that a significant number of feminist activists and scholars whose current intellectual creations are focused on these concerns. And I want for us a feminist resource in Arabic that goes into our context and some of our anxieties and aspirations around these questions.

Safaa T.: I first started thinking about ecofeminism in 2015, when the direct concern, as you mentioned, was the trash crisis in Lebanon, but it sparked a lot of considerations for the environment. During that same period, there was an increase in global discussions about the

impact of climate change on all of our lives, so I began to view our challenges from overlapping and widening viewpoints.

Feminism gradually became a lens through which I viewed many concepts and challenges in my context. I've come to notice these intersections with our lives and our daily actions, whether it's an ecological concern or not.

In the beginning, I thought the notion was distant, similar to other concepts, where we understand it on academic and theoretical levels but overlook their practical connections to society. So I wondered whether there was any ecofeminist work going on in the region. Is it possible to apply ecofeminist theories to our own reality? I want to add that I'm a member of the Wiki Gender team, and we worked on this issue in 2020. When my colleague, a Wiki Gender member, suggested researching and writing about ecofeminism in Arabic in early 2020, I was skeptical; I was doubtful that we could find any resources in Arabic, whether as theoretical writings or as documentations of active projects and initiatives from an ecofeminist standpoint. But as we started researching, the topic revealed itself to be more interesting and deeper than I had anticipated.² We discovered an abundance of initiatives and vital information regarding ecofeminism in the region. I realized that many projects do, in fact, fit under an eco-feminist umbrella. Practically speaking, many actions on the ground reflect ecofeminist frameworks, even if they don't call label themselves as such.

When Deema talked to me about a book project on ecofeminism in 2021, this concept was already clearer in my mind. But it was also a motivator for me to work on a publication that would deepen my understanding of it and contribute to more exploration of the topic. At this time, I believe it is critical to remember what I discussed previously. When we think of a book on ecofeminism in Lebanon, we may think it is far from reality; but in practice, the environment is not separated from the economy, our relationships, our daily lives, where we live, or from our sociological situation; it is part of it all, and every part of it intersects with the other. As a result, it is imperative that we begin discussing the environment by understanding its interconnections with gender, capitalism, and patriarchy.

² To view Wiki Gender's page on ecofeminism: https://genderiyya.xyz/wiki/نسوية_بيئية

Other than that, I believe that what feminism adds to any concept is a more justice-based perspective. Feminism assists me personally in the search for justice in any and all issues, whether it is in creating a more just environment for all, or in figuring out how to be better in how we deal with the environmental issues; in understanding how capitalism is built on the absence of human and environmental justice; and in establishing systems that are more fair, to all of us and to our environment.

Zeinab Dirani: Before we published the call for abstracts and papers for this book, we were conducting research on a number of important environmental issues in Lebanon, the region, and globally. We looked at what was written on various issues, including issues that are not given public attention, such as the relationship with spirituality, the labor of women farmers, or health syndromes that likely result from changes in our diet. Many of the texts we read did not have a gendered or feminist perspective, but we considered what feminist perspectives may add to the economic, political, sociological, and methodological aspects of the research. We have seen that, in the mainstream discourse on the environment, individuals and communities who are most impacted and contribute the least to environmental pollution, as opposed to, say, local industries and global corporations, are frequently held totally accountable for environmental deterioration.

Deema: I would like to point out here that since we started talking about ecofeminism and we put out a call for researchers, writers and artists, we did not use the term “ecofeminism” until the last months of working on this book. That was when we decided on the subtitle: “Eco-feminist Pursuits.” Of course, we were familiar with ecofeminist theory and some of its arguments and the different forms it may take in different part of the world, but we did not want to assume what work on the topics here entails and what it means for feminism and gender justice to interact with environmental movements, issues, and ecological themes in Lebanon; As Safaa pointed out, the labeling and categorization are not as important as understanding the multiple ways of being, working and organizing that value nature, the land, and agriculture, as well as the people and communities within their environments.

Our work on this book was accompanied by a process of meeting and getting to know groups active "on the ground" in order to grow ecofeminist conversations based on our mutual interests. We've been calling it a cross-movements and cross-communities infrastructure of solidarities. That's been a big part of how we work: connecting ideas, issues, generations, individuals, groups, and organizational tools and strategies, so that we can better support each other and build on each other's skills and experiences.

These meetings really moved me, and they gave me hope; after we saw spaces in Beirut shrink or close, some activists from various regions in Lebanon made use of their experiences, knowledge, networks and their dreams, to build new initiatives that include the land and agriculture or nature within their projects. And women are a key element of these groups in many locations, as founders, decision makers, and participants. You can read more about our talks and journeys to these different initiatives in Chapter 13 of this book.

Zeinab: Speaking about the trips, I just remembered what Ismael Sheikh Hassan from Nohye el Ard remarked during our journey to the south: "Saida now resembles Beirut fifty or sixty years ago." That is, when Beirut was a tree-lined metropolis with plenty of green space. It made me understand that Saida is now at a crossroads that will define its destiny, and maybe the future of Akkar, the Bekaa, and all of the other areas as well.

These visits to meet and know more about the various groups reminded us that there are always many roads for these cities to choose in their transition; there is always more to lose, but there is also more to retain. This conversation might lead us to a different realm, to feminist imagination and speculation. Thinking about feminism, the environment, and future possibilities allows us to both learn and imagine.

Safaa: The stories and experiences were what piqued my interest while working on the book and its contributions. All the contributions, whether research papers, personal reflections, or pieces of art, include stories about people's relationships with nature. Each story expresses a viewpoint that introduces us to a new aspect of ecofeminism. It's important to have these narratives, to document them, to have them remain with us, and to establish our own relationship with them; and it's also been important to see how much we have in common

with all of these individuals, even though each of us also has their own particular narrative that differs from the experiences of others. The unifying basis, though, is our relationship with nature. The stories also depict various expressions of patriarchy and/or capitalism's subjugation of women and environment.

These stories are sometimes a well of emotions and other times they are a source of inspiration for creativity; they can be a space for recreation and for feeling a sense of freedom, a source of livelihood or a way to confront collapse; an arena for defending rights, or a space for reflection and contemplation.

This diversity helped move ecofeminist topics beyond a purely scientific/research field. The issues found new life in the stories of people who remember what nature was like before all the changes it went through, and others who recognize the impact of the absence of nature over their current lives and what it lacks as a result. The topics are not only about the pollution of the river, but also the lives that have been altered, the communities that have been impacted, the livelihoods that have been harmed, the ways of life that have been warped, and the recreation areas that have been harmed as a result of this pollution.

We also attempted to construct the sage's (Maryamiyye) story (Chapter 8) in its own words, through various sources and anecdotes. Although we realize that as humans, we will not be able to capture the whole life of a plant, what we were seeking to emphasize was that each aspect of nature has its own story to tell, and that our practices can change the narratives and what they mean to us.

Given that we are working in the middle of an economic and societal collapse; this has impacted the majority of the texts in the book.

Safaa: In most of the texts, there is something that is expressing a relationship between ecology and the economy; sometimes it is about women's labor, and other times it can be about people's financial concerns. This connection takes us to more expansive and explicit convergences between the economic system and the environment, as demonstrated by Lama Abu Kharoub's (Chapter Six) and Hind Younis's (Chapter Seven) research projects.

What informed our work, as we are living in the midst of a national collapse on so many level, is our awareness that it is the product of decades of a repressive and exploitative economic system that has been damaging the environment in various ways, as well as destroying and

marginalizing numerous communities. But the collapse is also social, because we have been living decades of tyranny, from repression of liberties to the subjugation of women. I hope that this book, as well as other writings and productions that are coming out during this time, will open up new avenues for learning more about the relationship between the economy and the environment in previous decades, as well as avenues for envisioning a better, more environmentally and gender-equitable economy; that is, a just economy that has a strong ecofeminist perspective.

Deema: I agree with you, and you highlighted Hind Younis and Lama Abu Kharoub's papers. In Hind's essay, the denial of women's land inheritance becomes a feminist-environmental subject, especially when we focus on women's relationship to land, as we better comprehend the intergenerational economic repercussions of this disenfranchisement. Lama, on the other hand, writes in details about the exploitation of Palestinian women farmers; her research also addresses the loss of a sense of belonging among the farmers that she interviewed; the reason is not that the women are Palestinians on a "Lebanese land," but rather it is the economic and gendered exploitation and injustice that prevents any relationship from being established with the land, or with the people.

In many writings on ecology and economics, particularly in English, there is usually a nod towards their connection, through the word "eco" in both terms, which means home in Latin. And I believe that the current situation for many of us has led us to think more about economics. Prior to 2019, I had not given much thought to – or we had not thought collectively about— the country's financial industry and economic policies. Why were we only exposed to a celebration of banking secrecy, for example? Of course, we talked about our financial situation, and about the neoliberal economic system, and a lot of people were working and thinking about it. But the economy did not take up this much space in my daily life as it has since 2019; that is, since the collapse that we knew was coming before the 2019 uprising. The economic reality is now a daily, intimate phenomenon, and not only something happening in the background. The illusions we were living in are being shattered more and more each day, yet at the same time, inequality has increased; and here is the real fear: that our dreams will be shattered along with our illusions.

I'm currently reading the latest issues of Bidayat journal, which are about neoliberalism and consumerism. I see the connections as I read essays on how society changed after (and probably before) the civil war, through promoting an identity and lifestyle based on consumption and optics, giving life a superficial-material significance, and exuding a façade of economic prosperity and social capital.³ This system generates new demands and needs (intellectual, material, and nutritional) that we can readily devour, as well as a never-ending search to satisfy them.⁴ In this scenario, reliance on the private vehicle increases, at the price of ignoring and eliminating public and mass transit.⁵

This strategy may create a lovely image of "liberated" women, but it does not accomplish justice, nor does it take gender-based violence, domestic and care work, and cheap labor seriously. Material profit and the consumerist system may provide a beautiful and safe artificial environment for certain people,⁶ but they do not sustain a viable environment, nor one that is for everybody, the same way that the sun, water, and air are for everyone—or they should be. The feminist perspective can also indicate that men control the world of economics and politics, with a system that passes power from father to son. But we go back to the idea of systems and how existing systems nourish each other, and how we have been merging with a neoliberal model of development; what we could have been doing instead is building our future on a foundation of an integrated organic relationship with our history and stories—the kind of relationship that Safaa writes about so beautifully in her essay in this book (Chapter eleven).

The economy and the environment both of course go beyond a country's borders. In the last couple of years, many of us have been more geographically fixed, from the COVID-19 lockdowns, to the economic crisis, to the fuel crisis here. We stayed home or within a more

³ صعود الاستهلاك المُقدَّس في لبنان ما بعد الحرب. "منى خنيسر وسارة محيو. بدايات. العدد ٣٢. ٢٠٢١. ٥٨-٥٠.

"The Rise of Sacred Consumption in Post-War Lebanon." Mona Khneisser and Sarah Mehio. Bidayat. Issue 32. 2021. 50-58.

⁴ "مجتمع الاستهلاك أو رسملة القيم" عبد الإله بلقزيز. بدايات. العدد ٣٢. ٦٨-٥٩.

"Consumer Society or Capitalization of Values." Abdelilah Belkeziz. Bidayat. Issue 32. 2021. 59-68.

⁵ "ثقافة الاتكال على السيارات الخاصة في بيروت." مارك بيرري. ترجمة فيفيان عقيقي. بدايات. العدد ٣٣. ٢٠٢١. ٣٧-٢٤.

"The Culture of Reliance on Private Cars in Beirut." Mark Perry. Translated by Vivian Akiki. Bidayat. Issue 33. 2021. 24-37.

⁶ "أسوار الحرب وأسوار ما بعد الحرب." مات ناش. ترجمة فيفيان عقيقي. بدايات. العدد ٣٣. ٢٠٢١. ١٦-١٤.

"War Fences and Post-War Fences." Matt Nash. Translated by Vivian Akiki. Bidayat. Issue 33. 14-16.2021.

confined location—and sometimes to a confined near-sighted mental space. The ecological and economic components, however, defy spatial (and temporal) borders. I think here of Asma Al Hajal's research (Chapter 10), in which she shows how the damages from the Litani River's pollution are not only felt at the river's bank. There are aspects that transcend national boundaries, as we read in Zeinab's paper on diets and our relationship with our bodies as women (chapter one). Of course, the environment and climate change have become one of the most frequently discussed issues on a global scale; but in Lebanon today, this issue also has other priorities, and I think this applies to other non-industrial countries and those experiencing major economic crises. The attention is on food security, the need to implement balanced economic policies, and to benefit from our natural and human resources (including people and their varied skills and experiences) in reciprocal, balanced ways instead of destroying the environment and starving people.

Zeinab: In Saida, there is a garbage mountain. We see it, we smell it. Sometimes, we may not see it, but we can smell it from afar. Its existence transcends its space, with the odors and diseases it spreads, the pollution caused by it, and the violence it exerts on the sea, air, land, water and living creatures. When I was young, I thought every city had its own garbage mountain. I wanted to pay it a visit, but its aroma drew me in first. The garbage mountain has now been buried and rehabilitated to become a mostly closed public park. A recycling factory was established in Saida, but it sat idle for a long period, due to conflicts among the political powers in the city about how to allocate it. And, even after it became operational, it is still used in every municipal and parliamentary election; the health of the region's inhabitants is jeopardized for the sake of political and personal interests during every election season.⁷ Everything in the book made me think about our relationship with the environment and how damaging this isolation imposed on us was, in ways we may or may not recognize. I'm also thinking about all our recent work at the Knowledge Workshop. Our focus in the Feminist Storytelling and Oral History Project at KW last year was on women's relationships with the

7. 2017 تشرين الأول 23 جبل الزباله يدشن معركة صيدا الانتخابية. "آمال خليل. الأخبار. الاثنين.

<https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/239548>

"The garbage mountain inaugurates Sidon's electoral battle." Amal Khalil. Al Akhbar. Monday 23 October 2017.

<https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/239548>

sea, and on queer spatial experiences; and in the personal stories of women and gender non-conforming people that we documented, their relationships to the environment and the land always emerged, even when we weren't asking about it.

Deema: And when we held a zine-making workshop at KW last year, we decided that its theme would revolve around people's relationships to land, food, and healing, especially for women and trans people. Given the interconnection of the projects we were working on, after we finished making the zine, we came up with the idea of including it in this book.

Safaa: The issues of this book are very diverse; they range from land to river, to bodies, to Reem Joudi's text on cultural and artistic works (chapter 4) and Mihad Haidar's text on women's novels (chapter 5) as she attempts an eco-feminist reading of two literary works. I loved Elizabeth Saleh's paper as well, with its ingenuity and boldness in tackling the problem of "Parking in Beirut" (Chapter 3). Elizabeth is able to challenge our understanding of shared spaces and raise our awareness of what we lose when a corporation or bank expands.

Since the early stages of the book, with the call for submissions, we sought this diversity in writing styles and methods. We issued two calls. We put out a call for personal and creative texts and contributions,⁸ and another for articles and research papers.⁹ We gave the writers the freedom to propose issues at the intersection of ecology and feminism as they understand it, or shaped by their own experiences as women and/or queer people. We also sent out an invitation for researchers to work closely with us on a topic we agree on, introducing us to Asma Al Hajal, who proceeded with her research on the Litani River.

We also wanted the book to be open to other forms of expression and creativity, not only written texts. And so this book includes three pieces of art: Rana Alloush's artwork that remembers her parents' relationship to the bousfeir tree (Chapter 9), Leen Aoun's photography that ponders on her relationship with hibiscus leaves and her body (Chapter 2),

⁸ Knowledge Workshop. "Call for Personal Stories on Women and Ecology." <https://www.alwarsha.org/call-for-personal-stories-on-women-and-ecology-eng/>

⁹ Knowledge Workshop. "Call for Papers on Feminism and Ecology." <https://www.alwarsha.org/call-feminism-ecology-eng/>

and digital art with Ibtisam Dib, in her distinctive style (Chapter 14). We later collaborated with Ibtisam as the book's designer. And it was a very enjoyable experience for us to come up with a visual design that reflects the spirit of this publication.

Working with the book's authors has been a learning experience for us as an editorial team, highlighting the different approaches to ecofeminism. Working with the peer review team further widened our analytical horizons, as they offered critical insight in their review of essays.

As I go through the book, I feel that each contribution adds to my knowledge in new ways, and that each style of writing is distinct; some of the texts are poetic or based in storytelling; some follow a more analytical or documentation approach. This is what we encouraged from the beginning, as we wanted the book to be a multifaceted tool for any reader to find a path or link with the subject that they are interested in.

When I think about what we've accomplished with this book, I remember what Deema said (Chapter 15) about our responsibility towards future generations, and I hope that by narrating our experiences now, we've made room for a possibility in the future.