

An interview on gender trouble: Feminism and change in Lebanon

An interview with Azza Chararah Baydoun

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Through the conversation held with Lebanese activist and academic Azza Chararah Baydoun, this chapter shows a vital journey, among many other possible, of a feminist woman who was a member of a small communist political party in her youth (Organization for the Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL)). With the perspective of several decades, Azza Chararah Baydoun reviews the gender relations in this communist organization, the civil war, the militancy in non-governmental organizations, and the main challenges that have been posed to feminism in Lebanon.

1. Introducing the Lebanese case

N. If you want I will start as a way of introduction, to show you a little bit of what the editors are preparing. It is about narrating 100 years of history of the Communist Party. It is about communist parties in the Middle East, with a historical perspective, after the Russian Revolution. The objective would be to try to see this evolution of this communist ideology up till now. (...). Yours will be the only chapter on gender issues; your words will structure the whole core of the chapter.

A. But you could interview women that were more politically active in that era and hence better informed than me.

N. I think you are fine for it. I have read for example the interview that you had done in 2015 with Tarek Abi Samra, regarding the publication of your book "A citizen, not a female".

N. This edited book it is 100 years after the start of the communist ideology. The idea is to see this long-term perspective in the region, from the birth of the ideology until now. I think it is very interesting to understand it within the parameters of the Lebanese context, in this local scale. It would mean hear connecting history and gender within the Lebanese local setting (see chapters X and Y for the Lebanese Communist Party and the New Left).

A. First of all, I have to tell you that all my work is local, I have never conducted any fieldwork outside Lebanon. I am not a historian, either. If you ask me a particular question I can answer from a strictly personal experience. Furthermore, my knowledge of other Arab countries is scarce, and comes from my readings, mainly. I would not call that first-hand knowledge, naturally; unless you really go down to the field you do not produce knowledge.

N. Azza, that is good enough for me. I think it is very important to have this retrospective for the book, the long-term look, and it also makes sense to limit it to a case, to a national scale, that is good to focus in the Lebanese context. We can see such a perspective of the country in a

¹ I had two long interview sessions in Beirut with Azza Chararah Baydoun, researcher in gender and psychology. One was held at the end of June 2017 and the other at the end of August 2017. Azza is a researcher and gender consultant, a founding member of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (BAHITHAT), as well as a member of the National Commission for Lebanese Women and of the Lebanese CEDAW committee.

way of crossing gender issues in it. That would be the first look and then we can look down at other related issues. (...) First of all if you think about a specific historical question I would ask about gender relations in Lebanon. People tend to talk about the four phases in such a perspective, the four phases of the feminist movement in Lebanon². They try to understand the evolution of Lebanese society using this gender lens.

2. The four stages of feminism

N. I have a few references on the stages of Lebanese feminist. For example, the one by Bernadette Daou she is well informed about it (Daou, January, 2015).

A. Yes, you are right. Researchers are using this periodisation. It is especially so, for young researchers. Many young researchers have interviewed me on the feminist history in the country. They tend to do it, because we had a civil war that lasted for 15 years and that somehow produced a sort of a fissure in our memories dividing it into 'before the war'-'after the war' and a split in our lives that affected the political, economic and social processes.

N. It was then the representation of a rupture.

A. Yes, it was rupture. Let's take for example the Lebanese Women's League, which is a coalition of women's associations of all sorts, and you may want to know that at that time women organisations – except for a handful of women informal groups – did not call themselves feminists. It was not different from women of the 20s with the *Nahda* movement, women associations were predominantly welfare associations, even if a couple of them called for the 'right to vote', or for the right to education and so on. But if you look closely at what they actually did, you will see that, except for few exceptions when they participated in national anti-colonial demonstrations, they were apolitical. Even later, and up until the eve of our civil war, you would not see these associations as part of the political movement, not even as activist in the way you would think about activism nowadays, such as marching in demonstrations or holding sit-ins by way of pressuring the legislator for women-friendly laws or opposing certain sexist legislative measures, etc.

² The first wave of Lebanese feminism emerged with the pioneers (*Raedat*) who lived in the 1920s (*Nisaa al Ishrinat*). Their work was in charities as *al-jam'iyyat al-khayriya*. 2. The second wave was represented by the Lebanese Women Union, which was founded in 1920 in order to bring together Arab nationalists and Leftists. The second group, the Christian Women's Solidarity Association, was founded in 1947 and composed of elites and haute bourgeoisie women representatives from twenty Christian organizations. Parties had women's organization, especially in the socialist ones. During war, all activities were stopped. 3. The third wave started with the launching of the United Nations' Decade for Women in 1975 during the first World Conference on Women, in 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Beijing stimulated the formation of: the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) and the National Committee for the Follow Up of Women's Issues. It was composed of members from both the governmental and nongovernmental sectors. Other members of the Lebanese Council of Women were: Working Women League, Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (*Bahithat*), the Collective for Research and Training on Development-Action (CRTD-A), Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LCRVAV, from 1997). 4. The fourth way is the time of the Arab Spring. It connects with women demonstrating against Syrian occupation after Hariri's assassination. Other groups are then important. Like KAFA (Enough), which sprang out of LCRVAV in 2005 as a nonprofit, nonpolitical, and no confessional civil society organization. Its aims were to mitigate the causes and results of violence and exploitation of women and children. New organizations emerged in this era focusing on raising awareness of domestic violence and protesting the vulnerability of its victims in the legal system. Central issues are here: domestic violence and abuse of female domestic workers, environment, women's art, male-centered knowledge, and sexual diversity (See more in (Stephan, Nov. 7, 2014)).

3. Feminist consciousness through communism

I could tell you about the feminist consciousness – raising a women's committee in the communist organization, the Organization for the Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL)³– that I was affiliated with during the years 1970-1973. One salient feature of this organization is that affiliated members were highly educated, professionals, teachers, journalists etc. Education was an essential 'prerequisite' to membership in the hope of attracting to the organization independent activists, not "faithful followers". This stance was carried over to the women's committee of the organization.

At that time, I was a Math teacher at a girl's state school. I encouraged my students to participate in the 'student movement' strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins, demanding the improvement of the education system. I would offer them 'gratifications' for that purpose. So, if they participated in a demonstration, or if they went on strike which meant missing regular classes, I would promise to make it up for them by giving them extra teaching sessions on Sunday!

My feminist consciousness found its vocal expression through communism, at that time and in that committee, in particular. To tell you the truth, I am not aware of how and who called for the formation of a women's committee in the OCAL. I do not remember how it was established; it was somehow of a spontaneous thing.

In those times, consciousness rising was identified with acquiring knowledge by reading the communist classical texts (*tathkeef*) and by being informed of what was going on. High value was accorded to being knowledgeable and analytical at the same time. We were all reading and reading, and always discussing – we had the most interesting intellectual debates. Mind you the books we read were not Arabic ones, only French and English. The 'comrades' who provided these books and pamphlets published by western feminist groups were, at that time, especially Fawwaz Traboulsi⁴, and also his, then, wife Mary Kelly, an American national who, herself, was a feminist.

As for the members of the women's committee personal lives, I can say we were not conventional. In my family, for instance, I did not experience harsh gender discrimination. I was privileged in more than one way, maybe because I belonged to a relatively better socio-cultural class. Maybe girls who had educated parents were better off than daughters of less educated ones. Needless to say, by being a communist I rebelled against my family 'bourgeoisie values and norms'. As for others, I can say we were relatively independent women, we were married in a non-conventional way. I guess we felt we belonged to an International movement. Those were also the days, not only of national anti-colonial revolutions but of sexual revolutions, at least for some of us. We, in the women's committee of OCAL, started something that looks to me now out of tune of the ordinary, or at least it is how I see it now when I think back (laughing). I do not know if younger women activists would do something like that now. We circulated amongst us –members of the women's committee– an article entitled "the myth of the vaginal orgasm". Some members of the women's committee thought our sexuality was an important issue, and knowing about it, would be something that would liberate us. We started disseminating ideas expressed in this article among our women comrades. We were there by addressing intimate relations between men and women. Some men comrades reacted with aggression. All this really stopped very quickly because the executive committee –the highest leadership of the OCAL– was not particularly happy with our orientation. Traboulsi, who played

³ منظمة العمل الشيوعي في لبنان (*Munazzamah al-'amal al-shuyū'ī fī lubnān*), Organization for the Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL).

⁴ Fawwaz Traboulsi was part of the *zu'ama*, the leaders who had always believed in the *álmani*, the secular. Member of the Communist Party during that time. He is now a Lebanese thinker, author and Leftist activist.

the role of a pseudo-coach to us and was known for his sympathy for our 'cause', was replaced by a person who was more traditional, in order to 'monitor' our behaviour and correct our 'deviances'... not that this was overtly expressed, but this is how I personally perceived it at the time.

N. You have not told me much about the books you were reading?

A. Okay. We –“English-educated” women– read the literature written by the better-known feminist American and British writers of the second wave feminist movement, comprising Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, Shulamite Firestone, Anne Koedt, etc. “French-educated” ones read translated books of these authors and French ones too. I personally was thrilled and felt these writers put in words for my thoughts and feelings. To me those were moments of lived 'oceanic' feelings of sisterhood. No soon did we realize, however, that foreign languages were not accessible to all women comrades. So, we members of the women's committee, started writing in the journal *al-Hurriyya* (the Freedom) –the voice-journal of OCAL, then. The few articles I wrote took up the theme of the reification of women's bodies, women in education and the like –themes of the times. I used then a pseudonym for, you know, I could not use my real name because I was a civil servant, I taught in a state secondary school.

N. If we continue with this chronology of events we were following earlier, what happened in relation to the OCAL?

A. Around the mid of the year 1973, the OCAL was inflicted by schism when almost half of its members were expelled. This was preceded by an internal crisis that rocked the higher leadership, the reverberations of which reached lower strata –cells and committees of the Organization. I myself was oblivious to what was going on as my husband –who was involved deeply in the crisis– did not discuss it with me, in conformity with the 'rules' that forbade the chit-chat permeating information between cells of the organization. We both followed the rules and no mention of the crisis between us was articulated.

Women Committee members, however, started, and all of sudden, arguing fiercely. I was surprised then, for up until then the atmosphere was fairly harmonious. I learnt later, of course, that the conflict between these women was no more than a reflection of the conflict raging between their respective husbands in the executive committee of the Organization!

When approached by one of the individuals (not my husband) trying to convince me to join their party in their attempt to split the organization. I answered that “I am not sure I want to leave the Organization, I need to discuss more with my fellow affiliates of the cell”. My wish was not actualized and I was expelled from the Organization without discussion, and no reason was presented to me as to why my presence was not wanted anymore. It was obvious that the decision was taken because I was considered to be an 'obedient follower' of my husband or of my brother – both expelled by the executive committee of the OCAL. My brother and my husband were more into radical socialism meanwhile the others were more into mainstream communism. I was not even aware that they were the ones initiating the split, not until later.

I realized that I was treated as a follower. It made me miserable and angry. Imagine, these comrades were supposed to have a progressive mentality and a pro-feminist stance. And what did they do? They simply treated me as if I was an appendix to men they disagreed with and not somebody who was autonomous, somebody who has, his or her own ideas. They did not think of me as an independent thinker who may have been on their side in the raging conflict. I felt cheated, but also stupid, not to have guessed the existence of *décalage* between what these people say, and what they do, and that progressive political orientation does not necessarily imply advanced social attitudes. I guess we were busy and did not see that coming.

N. Yes, you don't focus on contradictions you focus on the political rhetoric of things.

A. Yes, you are right.

N. So you were just punished because you were perceived as an appendix of your male relatives.

A. Exactly.

N. So, all these events made you think a lot I guess.

A. Actually this expulsion affected me in more than one way. I am, you see, one of the numerous Arab individuals that became politically conscious after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Before that I was apolitical and so was my social milieu. In my attempt to look for an arena for my frustrated political and newly acquired awareness, I was drawn towards the Leftists circles, and simultaneously drawn further away from my older friends on account of their having what was termed, then, the 'bourgeois mentality', and because they were mostly anti-Arab. The social and emotional void thus created was filled by comrades from the organization. When expelled, my social network was reduced greatly. This was devastating to me. Fortunately, I got over it quickly. Later, during the civil war and after the cessation of civil hostilities, we became friends again. As we grow older –you know – our conception of friendship differs and belonging to the same political organization does not make two individual friends, nor do two individuals have to agree politically in order to become friends. Anyway, the onset of the civil war marked a new era for me.

This is my recount of my experience in the political organization OCAL. Needless to say, my reminiscence of my experience in OCAL is tinted with my personality in all its complexities, and I am sure another member will recount to you a different one.

Are you sure this is useful to you?

N. I think it is great, it means looking at your own biography within the context of the gender agenda in the country.

A. I would like to throw in a word by way of evaluation of my experience in OCAL. The ending, even if negative, does not dismiss the feelings and memories of wonderful and exciting times I had in OCAL, nor the gratitude I have in my heart for the influence of comrades on my political and feminist formation. I, unlike some of my comrades from both genders, embrace my experience in it, and acknowledge with affection, its effect on my life.

4. The appearance of violence in Azza's life⁵: "the incident"

A. After the OCAL days, I started working with 'The Palestinian Women's Union'. It was strictly welfare. I had given birth to my twin girls Hind and May in 1972, I did not have regular help and was busy, with the task of bringing them up. The time I dedicated helping in welfare activities with the Palestinians was in 1973 – the eve of the 1975 Lebanese civil wars. Violent incidents were erupting between the PLO (armed factions of it) and the Lebanese army, and the Left sided with the Palestinians in line with its long standing attitude towards all 'reactionary and defeatist' Arab regimes that 'betrayed' Palestine and the Palestinians and did not support them in combating Israel.

Reverting to our previous talk concerning feminism, you may want to know that – not different from the Lebanese Left – women liberation was not on the immediate agenda of

⁵ I have chosen to establish such a section because I have realized how from the Lebanese civil war the topic of violence has been a constant in Azza's preoccupations.

Palestinian Women Union. The saying went that we needed to direct our efforts towards the 'primary contradiction' *yani* (meaning) fighting Israel and the capitalist reactionary regimes and postponing attending to the 'secondary contradictions' – those between men and women – till the primary ones are resolved.

On the ground, we were helping with the relief work. We worked hand in hand with women Palestinian militants in hospitals that took in the wounded, the Palestinian wounded in battles with the Lebanese army or the Christian militias. All this welfare work was obviously foreign to our intellectual and feminist background and activism.

It was within the context of relief work that I experienced such intense revulsion towards violence that would determine my future everlasting attitude towards it, and revolutionary violence not excluded. It was the sight of blue corpses that started coming to the ER of the hospital I was volunteering in 1975. Against Israel, the occupier, violence was acceptable, rather demanded, but against fellow citizens? What I saw that day was revolting. It was physical. I threw up. Those blue corpses of men and women were killed, because they were Christians or Muslims?

When I saw those corpses, I got sick and I remember that I ran like crazy down the stairs, I could not wait for the elevator to arrive. And that is it. I realized the meaning of violence. I became apolitical. I realized I was a coward (laughing). This happened with many of my friends, both men and women. It was unacceptable for me. That day I left everything. And that was the beginning of the war. I was completely blocked.

It was then when I realized that the motto "Violence is the road to liberation", that was part of our Communist training was not bearable to me. Then I started putting things in a different perspective, and the thought "I cannot bear my children be hurt, nor people close to me be hurt" was overwhelming. Following that incident, I realized I was a coward and embraced this characteristic of mine (laughing). That day I left everything behind me. All connection with the Left was abandoned for good.

N. And afterwards?

A. You could say I 'hibernated' for 15 years – the long of the duration of the Lebanese civil war. I was completely apolitical. An objective factor that forced me, and many of my acquaintances, to retreat from public life, was that we had to be confined to our homes for a great part of the day. We were forced to home-staying because of the shelling, mostly random, that restricted our mobility to a great degree. We would go to work, and finish our survival chores in the mornings when militia fighters, of both sides, were 'resting'. At around 1:00 p.m. shelling would be resumed.

During the war, many of our friends tried to look for a way to go out of the country; to France, mostly, and to other places. Sometimes Cyprus because it was very near. But we – my husband and I – took a conscious decision to remain in Lebanon. During the war, we were just fighting for our daily living, for our basic survival. The militias would confiscate bread or gasoline for days, and we would be left out of some basic items. When I think about it in retrospective, it was bad; yet compared to what happens in other countries during civil wars, we were ok. Except of course that our life was reduced to preoccupation with survival and safety issues; praying the children return safely from school, be able to buy basic necessities for food, have water and electric power etc. It was during confinement in our homes that I resumed my studies and shifted majors from math to social psychology.

I think I resumed my university studies in self-defence against the cultural void created by the civil war. It was a leeway to get myself interested in something beyond survival. I got my bachelor and M.A. degree. It was when the war ended that I started work towards my PhD degree.

When the hostilities stopped, after the Taef accord, I resumed my interest in other things beyond survival – so to speak. With women fellow researchers, we legalized a gathering

we had formed in 1986 – four years before the end of the Lebanese civil wars – and made it into an NGO by the name of the “Lebanese Association of Women Researchers” which is known as *BAHITHAT* (women researchers, www.bahithat.org) after the name of the periodical that the association publishes every two years, or so. We are, currently, several tens of women researchers who share interest in research in social sciences, basically. It is non-political, anti-sectarian, and had very few objectives, mainly to provide a platform for women researchers, particularly young researchers, support them materially and legally. That was back in 1993, the time of the ‘NGOization’ as termed by many. If the NGO was apolitical, its members were political individuals. After Hariri was killed, and after the 2006 war with Israel, there was a strong division between two groups (pro-Syria/against Syria, pro-Hezbollah/against Hezbollah). That was the problem then. To avoid schism, we decided to refrain from political discussions.

N. I suppose you have seen many changes in the trajectories according to the times and to the transformation of gender issues.

A. Yes, of course. For example, I can tell you if you want about the beginning of veiling among my high school students. It was after 1989, in the context of the Iranian revolution. Before that, when a girl student of mine suddenly decided to put on the veil I would ask her: but what is the matter with you? And she would say, “I want to protect myself”.

N. It was like asking for respect.

A. Yes. It was perceived by the newly veiled adolescent girl as a way to induce respect and to protect herself from sexually tinted harassments. After the Iranian revolution, the veil took a political meaning and a means of asserting oneself against family. Can you imagine, the parents of adolescent girls would ask the school administration to side against their rebellious children? They asked us to forbid veiling emphatically by declaring that it was against the school regulation to be veiled. It was the parents who requested that. I followed this issue day by day. It was the parents who stood up against the veiling of their daughters and that was very new.

5. “The activist retreat” period, the post-war period and the NGOization after Beijing.

N. We will follow again the chronological structure. We could start focusing on the gender differences from the beginning of the OCAL. How connected Socialism was with the Baath ideology and Panarabism?

A. I cannot answer this... Somehow as individual militants in a Leftist organization, some of us may have been qualified as ‘arrogant’. I am one of those. We perceived ourselves to be more educated than the Baathists and had, thus, a clearer vision. This is surprising to me now, for I cannot recall what is that then was so vividly clear to me! I, and many of my comrades, was too full of myself to have noticed them, or put any effort to get to know them. I am sorry but I cannot answer your question.

N. What about the gender perspective then?

A. One of the indicators of communist organizations, or parties that differentiated it from nationalist ones, was supposedly attitudes towards women. The Lebanese communist party, even if termed revisionist by us, had a committee whose mission was to enhance women’s condition. It is still working; it is still there. “The Committee of Women’s Rights” that was, unlike our Women’s committee in the OCAL, a formal and state-recognized organization. Only, the

strategies of all the Leftist women organizations were identical “Women rights will be attained once society is liberated; then we all will be liberated together”.

As I said before, the women’s committee in OCAL went beyond this strategy as manifested by its raising and discussing Feminist issues, even if these were not manifested in articles published in *al-Hurriyya* – the official voice of OCAL. We could do it because we had our own space within the organization. Moreover, we belonged to middle-middle and upper-middle classes. There were few workers, few peasants in OCAL. We were relatively privileged women (I am not well informed about the class affiliation of men in OCAL) and we were relatively free in our personal lives: we were not highly restricted in our mobility, nor in our sexuality, etc. We had solved such issues. Individually, we did not have to deal with issues of gender discrimination that women of lower socio-cultural classes had not resolved yet.

N. So, it was difficult between these two types of women. So, there were strong barriers between the two groups of women.

A. Not totally; remember, as feminists, we were supposedly bound to all women by ‘sisterhood’. With women Islamists, it is different. We were not aware of the possibility of their emergence as an organized body. We were really blind back then. We were blinded by our own discourse; we could never have imagined the changes that occurred...

N. Yes, it happens often with changes in society. Things that are there cooking slowing and we are not able to see the coming of it.

A. Yes, you are right. I would not have dreamt of the dominance of the clergy, a person like Nasrallah, over our political life... That was impossible to imagine. We were naïve (laughing).

N. There was a lineal kind of thinking; that was the problem with communists. Was not that?

A. I guess so... we see things differently now. But of course, we were living in a very different era. Anyway, during the Lebanese war I retreated from the ‘public’. There was no way that you could be involved in the public sphere which was occupied by militias, where the rule of the ones that carried guns was dominant and the rule of Law was absent.

N. Yes, you told me, it was that day that you saw the open face of violence

A. Mind you, this is not the case of the Left. Some Lebanese and Palestinian women from the Left participated, or better say, wished to participate in fighting.

N. What about when there was the 1982 Israeli invasion?

A. Few summers before the 1982 Israeli invasion, and the first 3 months of Israeli invasion, we – my nuclear family – were spending the summer in our hometown in the South, Bint Jbeil, which lies within the “security belt” – as Israelis called it later – security for the Israelis, but not for us, evidently, very near to the Southern border with Israel. We fled Beirut when the ten-story buildings were bombarded by air strikes and brought to the ground as the Israeli jets were hunting Arafat in Beirut residence neighbourhoods. Half an hour after the twelve-hour car journey from Beirut, Ahmad was called to ‘present himself’ in Israeli military posts in Bint Jbeil. We learnt quickly that Israeli local agents were behind his arrest for reasons pertaining to local inter-familial enmities. Later, when interrogated by a francophone Israeli captain who asked him: “Why do you think you were arrested”? “Maybe because I am a communist”? Ahmad replied. And the interrogator said, “I –myself– am a communist too. Communists are not

arrested; only ‘terrorists’ are” (sic), the interrogator said. He then was asked: “Do you carry arms?” – “No”, he said, “So, you will be released”, that was the verdict.

N. So in the end you went back to Beirut and starting some research meetings, did you?

A. No, not ‘in the end’... We returned to Beirut right after the ceasefire and the Israeli retreat to the outskirts of Beirut, sometime in August 1982. Our research ‘gatherings’ did not start till four years later in 1986. We started as an informal group of researchers until Beirut was reunited after the Taef accord, and the city was reunited, and we joined another research/activist group from the East “Christian” Beirut, to form *BAHITHAT* –the formal NGO registered in the Ministry of Interior which I described to you earlier.

N. Another question. Talking about nowadays, the Arab Spring moment, I checked some works that criticize the metaphor of the “sectarian ghost”, and how laicism is against the “sectarian pact” (the *Taif*). What do you think about it? Actually, I have a problem with this term. Please tell me more about what you say in your writings that feminism is against the “Taif system”.

A. No, not against the ‘Taif system’ but against ‘taifieh system’... I will try to explain. “Taifa”, is used to qualify a religious group of people; “taifa” would be the religious community you belong to and may be considered a neutral, value free term. I, for example, belong to the Shia’ “taifa” (religious community), I do not have to be religious – not even a believer. I belong there because I was born to a father who was born to a father who was born to a father etc. in this Shia’ religious community. Our political system is *taifieh*-based, meaning that citizenship is confounded with religious community affiliation. As the father is the reference to this affiliation, ours is obviously a patriarchal system, and consequently anti-feminist. This is basically expressed in the sectarian Personal Status laws – highly gender discriminating laws – which have been the target of Feminist attack, for as long as I remember, and is previewed to remain for quite some time in the future. Our struggle for a civil family law is entwined with the struggle against the *taifieh* (religious sectarian) system.

Now, the pact you mention, known as the ‘Taef accord’, was a manifestation of the reconciliation between the different Lebanese religious communities involved in the Lebanese civil war. *Taef* happens to be the name of the Saudi City where the accord was concluded, and bears no connection to the terms “taifa” or “*taifieh*”. Amendments to the Lebanese constitution was based on the terms of agreements between the convening political representatives of religious communities in the Saudi city, Taef. Amending a constitution –renewing the social contract between groups in a society – entails the presence of constituent groups of that society... isn’t it? It is common knowledge that everybody has to be represented to validate the newly formulated ‘social contract’, not only the sectarian communities. Women were excluded from the ‘Taef accord’ but so were other constituents of the Lebanese society. Discrimination takes the shape of total blindness to all constituents of our society, except for religious sects. I am talking about peasants, workers, youth, professionals, political parties, syndicates, associations etc. these are examples of factions that were not there either. Women were not the sole absent constituent of our society.

But in some respects, the ‘Taef accord’ is good. It dictates that political sectarianism should be abolished gradually and that a Senate to be established which will be elected, or appointed, by leaders of religious communities. The Senate would be responsible for major decisions pertaining to basic founding ideas of the Lebanese Nation including decision of war and peace, change of constitution etc., and will thus be the arena for the major disputes between the Religious communities prompting them to solve their differences, and carry on their negotiations, peacefully. We, women hope that the family laws will not be a topic of

concern of this sectarian body. I myself am not so sure. Thus the citizens, the 'mundane' living, would be the mission of a secular parliament whose members will be elected for their merit to manage the citizen's lives, such as the resolution of the garbage crisis, and will be judged rationally according to delivering their tasks, not for their sheer religious affiliation. Unfortunately, neither the process of abolishing political secularism was launched, nor the establishment of house of Senate was conceptualized.

N. You must be sick of it, of the sectarianism. But some foreigners find it challenging, a very intriguing system, they can't believe such a system does exist.

A. You are right it is sickening in more than one way. I do not know about 'challenging' but I know some find it incomprehensible. When we – the Lebanese official commission presented the first CEDAW report back in 2005 before the UN CEDAW committee in New York, it took more than one attempt from our side to explain that Lebanon – this tiny country – had 15 family laws! (Corresponding to 18 "religious sects" or confessions). So, not only are Lebanese women discriminated against (in relation to men), but we have 'intra discrimination' – so to speak – as some women are more privileged than others depending on which religious community they were born into. Consider children custody for example; if the ex-husband is a Shia', he can retrieve a baby boy from his mother as early as the boy's second year; whereas if the boy happens to be born in the Sunni sectarian community, he can enjoy the mother's custody until he is 12 years old. This discrimination can be found in laws and measures pertaining to divorce, inheritance, guardianship, alimony... you name it.

6. A central focus from the 90s: violence against women

N. I would like to know more about when you started your research on violence against women from the nineties.

A. The issue of violence against women was publicly exposed in Lebanon in the year 1995, around the preparations for Beijing conference. Research on the subject was, henceforth, in demand, when professionals and activists concerned with women survivors of violence, as well as lobbyists with decision makers, needed to formulate knowledge-based approaches to the issue. I am part of the response to this demand. I was approached in my capacity as an academic/researcher on gender issues by both governmental and non- governmental, both local and Arab and (less so) international organizations. I have done field, archival and desk research on the subject, all published in books that are posted online on my blog⁶, as well as on the sites of the sponsoring organizations. I am in the habit of discussing results of my field research with women activists, students, interested professionals, researchers, etc. by way of disseminating, as well as obtaining feedback for my work on the subject.

What are we doing? We are not solving the root causes of the problem, of course, but at least we are preventing violence against women, because the women who are undergoing violence are not aware necessarily that they want to eradicate the gender order. These women who are oppressed and abused to a degree that they cannot feel – even perceive that they have problem, let alone have enough self-esteem to express their malaise and complain. Therefore, by regulating a law against family violence, you are reaching an advanced point in empowering women. It is not far enough point, ok, at the end you cannot solve all the problems at the same time.

The increase in the crime of the murder of women is a global phenomenon, not specific to Lebanon. Everywhere, men have become more violent. In my book *Cases of Femicide before the Lebanese courts* – an archival study of women killers, one salient conclusion is that these

⁶ <https://azzacharabaydoun.wordpress.com/>

killers are characterized by having an immature and childish personality. These are males rather than men. Their masculinities are impaired if they are unable to exercise their authorities over women relatives and spouses which is a necessary condition for their self-conception as men – for their gender identities. Women inferiority is essential to their elevated self - esteem and if “their” women’s behaviour (sexual behaviour particularly of daughters, sisters, wives, women relatives etc.) shows independence of these men’s immediate authority, their masculinities are threatened and killing these women is executed by way of restoring their masculinities. Killing is equivalent to restoring their honour – hence the term ‘honour crimes’.

My field studies have also shown that abused women who file complaints against their violent husbands more often have a level of education higher than that of their husbands. Similarly, the social status and economic level of their families are generally higher than those of the families of their husbands. Wife beating tends to have a relation with the elevated status of the wife’s socio- cultural or socio-economic status over the husband’s which is perceived by the latter as threatening to his authority over her. The husband’s authority being a major indicator of his manhood and of his gender identity and compromising either triggers in these men their aggression.

7. A Central Focus from the 90s: NGOisation and GAD (gender and development)

N. I think that Lebanon was very advanced compared to other Arab countries, don’t you think?

A. In what way is it ‘advanced’? Do you mean in its feminism?

N. Yes, it was a reconstruction of feminism.

A. You probably know that UN proposes approaches to human development such as GAD (gender and development); and some countries (Lebanon one of them) complies with its agenda for different reasons. You can say we – the Lebanese – were directly influenced by the UN stance on gender issues. Having had no agenda of our own after the stagnation of militant feminism during the fifteen years of civil war which resulted in destruction of ‘stones and humans’ (*al-hajar wa al-bashar*), what choice did we have? In the massive after – war reconstruction project of ‘everything’ – comprising state and societal institutions, all sort of support was needed including visions and planning and not only logistics, resources and expertise to all constituents of our society involved in the post-war massive reconstruction. Why not lend a hand to women organizations in their attempt to ‘reconstruct’ their organizations and their feminism(s) – as we tend to name it?

I would like to clarify one important idea in relevance to the Gender approach to development (GAD) which is sometimes overlooked by critics. This approach is formulated simply. It proposes that planning for development and executing the respective programs, in its various stages, need to take account of Gender as a socio-cultural construct. This means that those working for Human Development in a certain society, need to be gender sensitive; which in turn implies having acquired a thorough knowledge of the respective ‘gender order’, and the ability to identify instances where gender discrimination hinders the actualization of plans – both strategic and short term – formulated and executed within the frame of Human Development; and that identification be done for the purpose of overcoming the mentioned gender discrimination. It goes without saying, that GAD thus needs to be contextualized within each society. This is the task of local women organizations and civil society in general. It cannot be ‘imported’. If not contextualized – which, by the way, is no easy task – the gender approach to Human Development (GAD) is reduced to lip service and is utterly useless... maybe even a fraud.

In reference to the reconstruction of feminism you mention, I feel that GAD may be considered in Lebanon the 'operational expression' of mainstream feminism – one of the feminisms – working within the framework of CEDAW and other UN relevant conventions and resolutions.

Reverting to your question, I cannot say that implementation of GAD has been more successful in Lebanon than other Arab countries, I am not sure there is a reliable meter stick that would allow such a comparison. Maybe the fact that we acknowledge the presence of 18 different sectarian communities has allowed, up to now, the possibility of freedom of speech and the freedom to form associations and other freedoms which we – the Lebanese – seem to value in spite of the fact that these freedoms are not being useful in solving some of our pressing mundane problems – political and otherwise.

N. From the perspective of social movements, you have commenced the period of NGOization in Lebanon. It was the time after Beijing in 1995, it was also a moment of introducing gender activism in civil society. A new left feminism also appeared as anti-globalisation movement in the early 2000s.

A. I disagree. You probably know that Lebanon is known for its thriving 'civil society' and its numerous social associations, women associations as well; and this due to the fact that, except for little restrictions on the formation of any kind of social association, state approval – meaning its registration at the Ministry of the Interior – may be postponed till after it is launched, and even after it has embarked on its activism.

Now, if by 'NGOization', you mean that the women associations formed after the Beijing conferences were apolitical, then so were the older ones and both proclaimed being so in their mission statements. Yet, I think that active women NGOs in Lebanon are currently involved in political activism. They are, de facto, political. If, for instance, you consider the topics of their areas of activism, one by one, whether it is the family law, the citizenship law, electoral law etc., it is clear that these NGOs have to face certain political forces and groups, be it Islamists parties, religious institutions, the Lebanese Parliament, some state institutions etc. theirs is a political struggle for they face the political sectarian system by necessity, if not by choice; and they do!

N. Sometimes it is difficult for me to see this difference between the sectarian and the rest of the "citizenship crossings" an individual has to go through in Lebanon.

A. You are not unique in this. It is not that easy to make sense of. You have to belong to a religious community to be a 'citizen' of the Lebanese Republic, which is obviously a contradiction in terms. You cannot be a candidate for the parliamentary election, for instance, unless you proclaim your affiliation to a religious sect. For example, there are a number of chairs in this particular district (*mohafadat* or *caza*, as the case may be) designated for Shia' community, another number for the Sunnis and so on. If you happen to be running for a chair in that district, and if nominated by a secular party such as the Communist party, you have no choice but to revert to the religious community you were born in and claim – believer or not – your religious identity along with your party affiliation for the duration of the campaign. So, if you have been nominated by the Communist Party for parliamentary candidature of a certain district, you would be called in our sectarian system, "the nominee of the Communist Party for the Shia' chair" in that particular district, and no one would point out at the obvious absurdity of your temporary qualification or 'title'!

N. And for the Shia', you are a communist (Laughing).

A. (Laughing). That's right. And for a communist you are an 'accidental' Shia'.

8. Final questions: Azza's research and the transformation of feminism

N. You often talk about the gap between generations in the feminist movement as the differences in the pivotal topics you address.

A. The young feminist movement, which you probably described in your previous questions as 'new left feminism', unlike the mainstream feminist movement, does not have a rights-based approach. But, if the rights-based approach does not express your needs, why should you adopt it? I see that there are different feminisms, and it is clear that at times it has to do with generations; older feminists are more involved with women's rights; they are more concerned with changing laws and governmental policies and improving legal measures etc. that empower women and serve their short term and immediate needs. They raise issues that remain on the social and legal and sometimes psychological level, thus revealing the fact that the mainstream feminist movement in our society does not want to take the responsibility of going deeper/further in combatting the patriarchal order; this being, however, the primary aim of the younger Feminist generation as was manifested by the motto/banner that was raised by the 'Feminist Bloc' – which is a coalition of groups of young feminists during the garbage crisis marches and protests in the summer of 2015. The banner that preceded the bloc read as follows: "The patriarchal system is murderous" (النظام الأبوي قاتل). This has been expressed in differences in concerns. Needless to say, there are many problems, and there are many issues, that need to be tackled and individuals should not be intimidated into concerning themselves with my own concerns because I believe they are more important than theirs, right? If young feminists believe that sexuality, for instance, takes a pivotal importance – as you say – in the objectives of their struggle, it is evident that it would be a main issue in their agenda.

Moreover, and in so far as research and activism is concerned, I, an older feminist for example, I am involved in research. Some feminist activists may feel there are more urgent tasks to attend to. Ok, if I am doing research on gender issues, I get paid and I turn my back on the whole thing, then I should be probably criticized for that. For, if I claim that I am a feminist and not a researcher only and I do – then more needs to be done – and I do; I go around meeting all kinds of groups that may benefit from my research such as social workers, students, government employees, decision makers, lawyers etc. to discuss my research with them, thereby disseminating knowledge about gender and getting responses from these groups to my research findings. These discussions pinpoint issues that still need highlighting, or discern areas for me that need more research to render approaching it knowledge-based etc. So you see, there is a distribution of roles. Some of us feminists are activists and others are researchers and some – like me – are sort of both.

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