

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

WHAT CONSTITUTES FEMINISM?:  
A STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN  
2020 BEIRUT

by  
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# ABSTRACT

## OF THE THESIS OF

Ginan Mahmoud Osman for Master of Arts  
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Title: What Constitutes Feminism? A Study on Contemporary Feminist Activism in 2020 Beirut

In postwar Lebanon, feminist activism emerged as a distinctive sphere within the broader field of civil society activism. In this context, feminist activists navigate and counter the power dynamics of the heteropatriarchy, racism, sectarianism, as well as histories and practices of imperialism and colonialism. This qualitative study explores the ways in which feminist activists in contemporary Beirut conceptualize and perform their activism. This thesis aims to study how personal motivations, experiences, and histories bring individuals into feminism, and how they shape trajectories of activism. Arguing that alliances, solidarity and strategic visibility constitute the main aspects of performed feminist activism, I explore the ways in which these strategies are manifested in concrete action. Finally, I outline practices of knowledge production, distribution and exchange as additional key elements of feminist activism.

To do so, I adopt a biographical research methodology, focusing on the personal narratives of selected activists. Based on this study's findings, I argue that feminism is essentially both, a longing for justice and constitutes a sense of self, propelled by personal and in many cases, painful experiences. I further argue that this longing for justice is externalized through activism and organizing which happens in manifold ways within the umbrella that forms the feminist movement. My point of entry for this study is the presence of feminist activists in the context of the nation-wide popular uprising Lebanon witnessed in October 2019. The interviews were conducted in winter 2020 through semi-structured interviews with 13 feminist activists, speaking from experiences as individuals and members of feminist collectives, informal groups, clubs, and NGOs. Findings were complemented by document analysis of primary and secondary sources relating to feminist activism and community organizing in Beirut, such as articles, videos social media posts, books, blog posts and others.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Study Overview, Research Questions, Objectives, Contribution

كرمال اللاجئين ما رح نبقى ساكتين  
كرمال النسوية ح نبيد الأبوية  
كرمال المثليين رح نقضي ع اليمين  
كرمال العابرات ح نهتف بالساحات

From Chile to Hong Kong, France to Zimbabwe, Venezuela to Algeria through Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon and many more: 2019 marked a year of global protest, uprising and revolution. Millions of people throughout the world have decided that the tipping point was reached, and formed movements to protest against socio-economic circumstances they deemed unliveable and systems of power they considered responsible for them, demanding accountability and justice. At the heart of these protests were women, gender non-conforming and queer people who took up space and carried their demands to the streets. One example is the well-known protest chant “El violador eres tú” created by a Chilean feminist collective. A song with a dance and a clear message against rape culture and gender-based violence: “The rapist is you!” In the age of globalization and connectivity, the performance quickly took over the world and was performed in numerous countries. This is how the chant was translated to Arabic and performed in the streets of the Lebanese capital Beirut, where a series of large, country-wide protests against the sectarian political system and its ruling class broke out in October 17, 2019. Fuelled by rage towards a deteriorating economic

situation that later turned out to be the worst economic crisis since the end of the Civil War in 1990, these protests targeted socio-economic issues and gathered together activists and ordinary citizens all around the country. As in other revolting countries, women and feminist activists were at the core of the movement in Lebanon. Their presence was felt and visible especially in the capital, Beirut, but also in other revolting cities. With creative chants that quickly took over the country, they protested against the sectarian, patriarchal system, and demanded economic, gender and racial justice, often including a sense of international solidarity and transnationality as the use of the Chilean chant proves. The above epigraph was frequently chanted by the feminists in the streets of Beirut. It is a dedicated declaration of solidarity with refugees, feminists, queer and trans people, who are among the most marginalized communities residing in Lebanon. Chants like this one broke societal and legal taboos. Significantly, by establishing connections between various issues and actively voicing and performing solidarities with different marginalized groups, feminist activists built a discourse around how struggles are interlinked, pushing for a process of awareness and societal change within Lebanese society. In addition, they made these connections within the spaces of protest and for the public of the uprising and those participating in it. Most importantly, it gave hope to individuals and groups who felt unseen, unheard, rejected and hopeless.

By playing a central role from the very beginning, feminists made sure they were seen and heard so that their demands were not labeled as “specialized” which is common in times of revolutionary processes in Western Asia and Northern Africa (Stipo, 2019). Another common claim feminist activists in the region have to deal with is the supposed “import” of feminism to the region. Contrary to what Western media

and local religious authorities portray, feminism did not originate in the West nor is it a new occurrence in Lebanon (Hatem 2013). Instead, it has a history with different trends, main demands, campaigns, groups and individuals fighting against structural social injustice through a feminist lens. Navigating, dealing with and countering the power dynamics of the heteropatriarchy, histories and practices of imperialism and colonialism as well as the sectarian political system, feminist activism accounts for a remarkable part of civil society activism in Lebanon. I argue that one reason why feminist activism plays a key role is the aforementioned practice of building alliances.

During the uprising, the attempts to form ties and alliances with many different marginalized communities all around the country were observable and manifested especially through discourse and protest actions. These ties of solidarity were the outcome of years of organizing and collaboration between feminist groups and groups who advocate against racism and for the abolishment of the Kafala system<sup>1</sup>, LGBTQ+ rights and economic justice. The capability to form alliances and incorporate and respond to current debates and issues hence constitutes a defining characteristic of contemporary Lebanese feminist activism. While the Lebanese state reacted to the movement with excessive force, aiming to divide the masses and bring the movement to a halt, I argue that contemporary feminism reacts to the questions and needs of the present moment using a variety of activist strategies, such as building alliances or practicing solidarity in various ways. With that in mind and intrigued to learn more

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<sup>1</sup> The Kafala system is an immigration regime that legally ties migrant workers' residency in Lebanon to their employer (HRW, 2020). Workers are therefore legally not allowed to leave the country or change their employer without their employers' consent (ibid.). This lack of agency regarding their status, job and living circumstances leaves them vulnerable and exposed to exploitation and abuse, a reality that is sadly common in Lebanon. Further, those who try to leave the country or change their employer without their employers' consent face legal consequences like detention or deportation (ibid.).

about the latest developments within the feminist activist movement, the main question I pose is: *What does feminism mean to feminist activists in contemporary Beirut?*

The existing body of research on feminism in Lebanon mostly has a historic focus (Stephan 2012; Daou 2014). There are only few recent studies on current feminist trends in the Lebanese context. Recently, there is a growing academic interest into aspects of contemporary feminist activism such as queer feminist thought from Lebanon (Kaedbey, 2014), the relationship between the feminist movement and the human rights discourse (El Helou, 2014), feminist movement building (Moughalian and Ammar, 2019) or the feminist movements' activism against gendered violence (Finn, 2020). This thesis is an attempt to contribute to this emergent literature and to be part of an ongoing conversation on feminism in Lebanon. To answer the question at hand, I conducted a qualitative study to understand contemporary feminist activism in Beirut, how it is conceptualized, thought about and performed by feminists, focusing on the personal narrations of activists. Following the traditions of especially Black feminisms, that is mostly informed by the personal lived realities of activists and thinkers, this research project is based on the notion that feminism and the decision to become a feminist activist is, in most cases, based on; personal motivations, histories and experiences. This is why I consider the investigation of these personal stories to be crucial in order to understand the concept of feminism in this context. The study is therefore embedded in the theoretical framework of biographical research. Biographical research is relevant to my research project as it is strongly based on the personal narratives of the activists I aim to work with. Based on this study's findings, I argue that feminism is essentially a longing for justice propelled by personal and in many cases, painful experiences. I further argue that this longing for justice is externalized through activism and

organizing which happens in manifold ways within the umbrella that forms the feminist movement.

Further questions I am raising are: *What are the dynamics and structures that shape contemporary feminist organizing in Beirut? How do feminist activists conceptualize their feminism?* and *What are the ways in which feminist activists perform their activism?* To explore these questions, I conducted interviews with 13 activists, organizers and researchers working on feminist issues who are involved in activist groups, feminist collectives, student groups, NGOs and research institutes. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted from a semi-insider perspective. The interview questions were formulated with the intention to identify different dynamics, debates and actors shaping feminist activism in Beirut and Lebanon. To complement my findings, I conducted a textual analysis of material produced by and about activists roughly over the past decade. The material includes printed publications, blogs, chants, articles, social media posts, podcasts and videos. The collection of data was conducted in late fall and winter 2020, the analysis has stretched into early summer of 2021. This study was hence triggered by, conceptualized, conducted and written in the context of popular uprising, political crisis, global pandemic, economic collapse, rising poverty and the Beirut blast of August 4, 2020. Collaborating with activists who were both directly affected and organizing around all these topics, I deemed it necessary to contextualize my study in this specific moment of crisis.

In this thesis, I do not intend to tell activists' life stories; rather, I aim to understand the bigger picture through the lens of the personal, that is their stories and own voices. In this introductory chapter, I present this study's basic premises and the literature in which I ground it, as well as the methods I utilize. Mirroring my

methodology that is grounded in the personal, in chapter two, I will first have a closer look at the sphere of the subjective, exploring activists' personal motivations to engage in feminist activism. Further, I attempt a characterization of the feminist movement on a bigger scale, focusing especially on the aspects NGO-ization of the movement and the importance of community. To add, I intend to investigate activists' notions of feminism and how they conceptualize it. Based on the activists' narratives, I argue that feminism essentially is both, a longing for social justice and constitutes a sense of self. Further, I highlight the ways in which activists perform their activism, focusing on different strategies and the motivations and reasoning behind them. The thesis closes with a conclusion and a brief reflection and outlook. As the feminist movement in Lebanon is diverse with various trends, it is important to note that this thesis does not claim to cover feminism or the feminist movement as a whole. It rather focuses on a small portion of feminist activism in Lebanon.

### ***1.1.1. Contribution***

This thesis seeks to contribute to scholarship in the fields of gender studies, Middle Eastern studies, sociology and activist practice. In the bigger framework of global social movements, the knowledge produced in this case study can be of use when looking at feminist participation and strategies, especially in the Global South. Due to the analysis of various topics relevant to global feminist struggles, including economic justice, racial justice, gender justice and questions of solidarities, I hope to contribute to transnational feminist scholarship. With the study's focus on Lebanon, I hope to generate valuable knowledge to the study of feminist activism in the MENA region. In addition, with this study I intend to identify gaps in the literature and hope to trigger further research questions for future scholarship in related fields.

Triggered by the specific time in Lebanese history we lived from October 2019 through the year 2020 until today, one of the themes discussed in this thesis is the question of the uprisings' impact on feminist activism and movement building. In my view, the uprising was an important milestone in the history of feminist activism in Beirut. Further, it was important to acknowledge the long history of organizing and activism that has led to this moment. I hence ask: *What are the dynamics, themes and structures that shape contemporary feminist organizing in Beirut?* Reflecting on the feminist interventions within the 2015 garbage protests in Lebanon, Kaedbey and Naber (2019) made a similar observation and assessed the protests as a milestone for feminist organizing in Lebanon. They concluded by stressing on the importance of acknowledging such pivotal moments and developments in feminist organizing. The authors argued that actively taking the time to remember, reflect and acknowledge accomplishments can be an important contribution to the work of activists and organizers. However, such reflection and celebration of accomplishment can easily take a backseat when facing an imminent political crisis. Constantly living under a political crisis pushes activists and organizers to react to developments rather than proactively campaign for their own priorities (Kaedbey and Naber 2019, p. 13). Being aware of this issue, I understand the busy day-to-day schedules of activists who usually are not remunerated for their work. There often is a lack of time for reflections on one's work, accomplishments and shortcomings due to the need of reacting to occurring political developments, while having to deal with personal life, jobs, care work and other activities that demand to be prioritized. Therefore, this study intends to provide a space for activists to reflect on the past, their individual and collective journeys, strategies, pressing feminist issues, accomplishments as well as mistakes, shortcomings and future

trajectories. Through generating this knowledge, I hope to contribute valuable information and knowledge to the activists I am working with.

## **1.2 Entering the Field: 2020 Lebanon, a Moment of Crisis**

The first time I got in touch with feminist activists in Beirut was in 2019, at the International Women's Day (IWD) march. I had recently moved to Lebanon and was not familiar with the scene, nor the different groups and histories. Identifying as a feminist activist myself, this particular march was eye-opening for me. First, I was impressed by the ways in which the participants of the march made their voices heard. One significant aspect of the performed activism was the use of creative and witty chants. More importantly, they introduced me to the current pressing topics and demands. The march took place under the slogan "Economic Justice is a Feminist matter", and the chants addressed a wide range of topics, including sexism, bodily autonomy, racism, the abolishment of the Kafala system, sectarianism, refugee discrimination, presenting an intersectional understanding of feminism. Later that year, during the popular uprising of October 17, 2019, feminist activists were visible again on the streets of Beirut, where they had a significant presence as part of the uprising especially through the political discourse they publicized through their chants.

Coming from Germany, the feminist marches I was used to were less radical and I often found myself missing a more intersectional approach to feminism. Experiencing the march in Lebanon was different. Here, the structures of power were questioned altogether, instead of merely demanding a seat at the table. Based on the participants' personal narratives, one of this study's findings is that IWD is a key element of performed feminist activism in Beirut, which will be discussed at length. Although I

was not familiar with the specificities of the Lebanese feminist fight, I felt a strong sense of belonging from the first moment. This sense of belonging is rooted in the intersectional nature of the feminist discourses that was pushed forward. From my own experience, I am aware of the brutally personal implications of political decisions and the various ways in which discriminating laws and legislations can affect one's life. The discourses hence spoke to me in a way the feminist discourses in Germany never did. I set out onto this project, primarily exploring feminism in Beirut but also my own politics. This thesis is hence a personal piece of work in which I aim to understand the motivations behind and conceptualization of feminist activism by my fellow feminist comrades in a specific space and time.

### ***1.2.1. Context: Lebanon from Popular Uprising to Economic Collapse***

“We were organizing long before October 17 and we will organize long after”, one of the participants told me during the interview for this study. While this study is triggered and inspired by the feminist presence during the popular uprising of October 17, 2019, it is not exclusive to this moment. I conceptualized the thesis in summer 2020, conducted the interviews in winter of that same year and the writing stretched into early summer 2021. Since the whole research process took place in light of a constantly deteriorating political and socio-economic situation in Lebanon, these circumstances had a lasting impact on my perspective as well as the activists' narratives which is why I deemed it necessary to contextualize this study in the particular political moment it was produced in.

Many who were present in Lebanon during the time of the uprising or *Thawra* (in English, “revolution”), have acknowledged a certain particularity about this moment, especially during the timeframe from October 17, 2019 until January 2020. It was a

moment in which all the political and economic problems which had been bottled up for years were finally expressed and publicly opposed on the streets. Activists all over the country employed a variety of strategies to deliver their political message. In an essay, feminist anthropology student Maya El Helou (2020) reflected on the meaning of time and temporalities with regard to the uprising stating, “The temporality of the revolution was unique in its ability to appropriate new meanings to public spaces that were not accessible to all strata of the public before” (El Helou 2020, p. 320). Due to the wide support among the population, it was a moment in which the impossible, an alternative reality, a change of the political and economic system and a broad legislative reform, suddenly seemed possible. The state, however responded to the protests with brutal force and violence against protesters. I have witnessed the excessive use of teargas, water canons and rubber bullets against protesters. Human Rights Watch reported physical violence against protesters by Security Forces, as well as frequent arrests of protesters for short periods of time (HRW, 2019).

The beginning of the uprising preceded what turned out to be the most difficult year for people residing in Lebanon since the end of the Civil War in 1990. In March 2020, Prime Minister Diab declared a state of bankruptcy by announcing a sovereign default (Cornish, 2020). In the wake of the outbreak of the global pandemic, the country then entered a strict lockdown for weeks, weakening the economy drastically, forcing businesses to lay off staff or close down. Further, the protests came to a halt due to the social distancing restrictions imposed by the state. This complicated and restricted the possibilities of political organizing and movement building. While the pandemic had further reinforced collective frustration towards authorities, it increased dependency on them (Saab, 2021). At the same time, the financial system collapsed, with the local

currency rapidly decreasing in value against the dollar, leading to hyperinflation and rising prices for goods and banks tightening capital controls. This subsequently caused unemployment rates to rise, sinking purchasing power and rising poverty rates with half the country's population living in poverty by May 2020 (UNESCWA, 2020). The devastating Beirut blast of August 4 that killed over 200 people, injured more than 7,000 and left 300,000 homeless (HRW, 2020), felt like the country was robbed of its last breath. In March 2021, poverty rates were still rising, with a looming food crisis ahead while Lebanese politicians were discussing the formation of yet another government under incoming Prime Minister Saad Hariri (Chehayeb, 2021). All of these events had implications on the personal lives of people residing in Lebanon. Furthermore, this intense moment of crisis was marked by poverty, unemployment, immense tension and conflict, physical, social and mental distancing, homelessness, violence, the loss of loved ones, hopelessness, depression and suicidality. When I conducted my fieldwork in late 2020, Beirut was not the same city it used to be in 2019. Since all activists I interviewed live in Beirut or considered the city as the center of their lives, said events had lasting effects on them. Some have lost their jobs, most of them have lost their money in the bank, and everyone was either personally affected by the blast or heavily traumatized. Naturally, participants talked about these issues during the interviews, linking the crises to their activism, reflecting on what feminism and activism can offer in these times. Our conversations taught me especially one thing: Feminism means a longing for social justice. One participant told me "Feminism is not a distant theory but a survival mechanism". I base my study on these notions and aim to further explore them in the following chapters.

## **1.3 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### ***1.3.1 Introduction***

By investigating contemporary feminist activism between 2019 and 2020 in Beirut, I aim to obtain a deeper understanding of feminist activism and activist practices located in the specific context of contemporary Lebanon. First, I provide an overview of the legal context of women's rights in Lebanon and then move to the history(ies) of the Lebanese women's movement and feminism in Lebanon. Second, I introduce Black feminist thought and theory, in particular the idea of understanding the interplay of oppression. Third, being invested in mapping out the links between feminist theory and activist practice, I chose biographical research as a methodological framework to conduct this study. In doing so I followed the tradition of Black and queer feminists who build their ideas, theories and activism on personal lived experiences. These traditions are significant in the context of my study as they tackle not only the position of women within society but present a more universal analysis, questioning the structures of power behind the oppression, as well as links to other marginalized communities. In the context of the feminist movement in Beirut, I see the attempt to bring forward a feminist analysis that seeks to understand oppression in similar ways. While I do not aim to compare feminists in Beirut to Black feminists in the US, I rather see a strong influence of Black feminist thought on feminist activists in Beirut. Following the example of Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2017), I put a conscious effort quoting and referring to especially feminist scholars and thinkers, aiming to contribute to a change of the hierarchies of Western academic knowledge production, amplifying the influence of voices that are often not considered "scientific" enough.

### ***1.3.2. The Women's Movement and Feminisms in Lebanon***

#### **1.3.2.1. Patriarchy in the Legal and Political Context**

Though considered to be comparably more progressive regarding women's rights and the rights of queer people vis-à-vis other countries in the region, the Lebanese reality is a patriarchal one. The patriarchy is enshrined in Lebanese law, which is evident in its reinforcement of discrimination against women and their ascribed roles and duties in society. The state officially recognizes eighteen different religious communities (HRW 2015, p. 1). In effect, fifteen separate laws regulate matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, which are executed by the corresponding religious courts. Furthermore, citizenship is gendered, so that Lebanese women cannot pass on their nationality to their children or spouses. In national as well as sectarian laws, kinship is based on blood relations. Children automatically inherit the sectarian identity and last name of the father (UNDP 2009, p. 72). According to the gendered and sectarian citizenship regulations, religious courts view men as central to the family and hence reinforce the inferior position of women under the law (Salameh 2014, p. 2). This legal discrimination is also present in the Civil Law and the Penal Code, for example, rape is insufficiently penalized, and abortion criminalized (ibid., p. 3). Women are also discriminated against on the Lebanese labor market, where they are facing a gender pay gap of 27% on average. In addition, limited possibilities of accessing decision-making positions, forces them to take on stereotypical, low-paying jobs (ibid, p. 8). In this context, the situation of migrant domestic workers (MDW), the vast majority of which are female, has to be highlighted. Due to *Kafala*, the sponsorship system in Lebanon, residence permits of these workers are tied to one specific employer or sponsor in the country, which creates a unilateral dependence. In addition, MDWs are excluded from the labor law, making them vulnerable to exploitation, verbal abuse

and physical harm. This also comes with harsh restrictions concerning MDW's right to movement and transportation. (KAFA 2012, p. 9). Syrian, Palestinian and other refugees are, by law, placed in strikingly vulnerable positions due to harsh limitations regarding access to the labor market, education and health care. Finally, politics constitutes another hardly accessible sphere for women. Only six of the 128 members of parliament are female (Dailystar 2018) and this lack of political representation of women is upheld by the sectarian, patriarchal state system. Feminist activist Riwa Salameh argues that personal status laws are decisively contributing to political nepotism, which enables the sons of influential families to inherit the political positions of their fathers (Salameh 2014, p. 10). However, this sectarian, patriarchal reality is not left uncontested. In the following, I will outline Lebanese women's movements and Lebanese feminisms, their histories, transformations and politics.

#### 1.3.2.2. History of the Lebanese Women's Movement and Feminism(s) in Beirut

Social movements in postcolonial societies cannot be understood nor analyzed without the colonial contexts that have shaped and continue to shape the political, social and economic situation of postcolonial states. The Lebanese women's movement formed and developed within historical events of extraordinary importance on a national as well as a regional level, such as independence, secular nationalist movements as well as projects of Islamic modernism and the influence of Western imperialism (Mitri 2015, p. 2). According to researcher Rita Stephan (2014), this is especially vital in analyzing the Lebanese women's movement, as the latter is constantly accused of being westernized and spreading Western ideas, thereby questioning the very basis of Lebanese society. Just as the American and European women's movements are studied

in waves, researchers like Stephan and Bernadette Daou (2014) argue that the Lebanese Women's movement can be divided into four waves.

Influenced by European feminists and European liberal ideology during the colonial period, the first wave emerged in the 1920s and spread especially in upper class, elite circles. One of the main activities of these early supporters of the women's movement was the establishment of charitable organizations as a socially acceptable and "respectable" way of participating in public and social life (Stephan 2014, p. 1). This early form of women's rights engagement was initiated by upper-class women and targeted them without risking their positions in society. The second wave of the 1960s and 70s emerged in the context of nation-building of the post-colonial Lebanese Republic. In addition, this generation of Lebanese women's rights activists was influenced by socialism. In this era, the first two major women's rights organizations were founded; the "Lebanese Women Union" and the "Christian Women's Solidarity Association". However, by the time the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, most women's rights advocacy activities came to a halt (Stephan 2012, p. 5). These early, elitist attempts of women's rights activism are characterized by the "iconization" (Kaebey 2014, p. 44) of a few well-known figures or "pioneers" and hence the reduction and erasure of movements and years of organizing. Further, these early attempts excluded topics outside of the socially acceptable norms dictated by the patriarchal state and religious authorities, such as female extramarital sexuality, bodily rights or the ruling state system.

#### 1.3.2.3. Feminism today

What I refer to as "contemporary feminism" in this thesis, began around 2005. It was introduced by the politicization of and advocacy for "personal" topics like the fight

against domestic and sexualized violence and structural legal discrimination against women through organizations such as the “Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women” and KAFA (Stephan 2014, p. 4). The main discourses and topics feminists brought to public attention since 2005 continue to be relevant today and are influenced by civil rights, development, feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movements and ideas. Further topics of importance include challenging the predominant heteronormative standards for (female) sexuality, bodily rights and sexual identity in Lebanese society, topics especially Lebanese queer organizations and groups put on the agenda (Mitri 2015, p. 9). As shown, all waves differ in their origins, actors and objectives. While the early beginnings of the movement were dominated by rather elitist and exclusionary parts of society and led by a few “icons“, there was a shift with attempts to a more collective approach nowadays though the movement still consists of rather small, exclusive circles today. However, this leads to the question whether painting the Lebanese women’s movement as one uniform movement allows for understanding the complexities of the movement.

Deema Kaedbey defines queer feminism as “a transnational, interconnecting, anti-racist queer feminist thought” (Kaedbey, 2014a, p. 13) and argues for a separation of queer feminism from the Lebanese women’s rights movement. To examine the dynamics of the feminist movement in Lebanon, Catherine Moughalian and Zeina Ammar (2019) conducted a qualitative study using interviews with activists as the main tool of inquiry. They contend that activists from different trends within the Lebanese feminist movement identify with a broader history and legacy of the Lebanese feminist movement. Based on their study, Moughalian and Ammar classify feminist activism in Lebanon as a movement based on activists’ perceptions of “belonging to something

bigger than individual groups”, “manifestations of solidarity amongst some of the feminist actors“ and “the mainstreaming of a gender equality discourse” (p. 12) in Lebanon. In my study, I adopt this framework of acknowledging the existence of a movement, which is why I refer to “the feminist movement in Beirut“ throughout this thesis.

Within the broader framework of the contemporary Lebanese feminist movement, trends vary profoundly, such as established women’s rights groups who closely collaborate with the state as well as groups who call for a change of the state system. Allison Finn (2020) argues that following the emergence of women’s rights movements locally and globally, in Beirut, “certain women – typically the Lebanese middle and upper classes – have been able to access relative daily freedoms, around education, labor, and mobility” (Finn 2020, p. 31). She continues however by contending that these rights and freedoms are often accompanied by the oppression of others as “gendered, racial, and economic domination remain key pillars of social codes, laws, interpersonal relationships, and everyday interactions” (ibid.). This is manifested especially in the kafala system through which Lebanese middle and upper class women often are considered the responsible “employer” and thus oppress others. Mainstream women’s rights groups therefore tend to vouch for an agenda that lacks an intersectional stance and only few women’s rights groups for example stand in solidarity with the victims of the kafala system or organize against it.

The groups and activists discussed in this thesis however, bring forward a feminist analysis that includes the categories race, class and gender among others. Focusing on feminist actors in the framework of Lebanese queer feminism as defined by Deema Kaedbey (2014), this study builds on the work of Deema Kaedbey, Allison Finn

Catherine Moughalian and Zeina Ammar. Based on my observations, I argue that Lebanese contemporary feminism is characterized by a sense of intersectionality. One of my hypotheses with which I set out this study is that due to their experiences of womanhood in Lebanon, contemporary feminists in Beirut demonstrate an awareness of the struggles of marginalized communities residing in the country. Here, over the past few years there has been a shift with a focus specifically on queer people, migrant workers and refugees. This focus emerged through the work of activist groups that have prioritized these issues and put them on the political agenda, which led to significant coalitions. I argue that these coalitions are built on a foundation of solidarity and form a central pillar of contemporary feminist organizing in Lebanon. Further, they are built on an analysis that, though limited in its scope, grapples with the interlocking structures of oppression that effect marginalized groups in different ways.

### ***1.3.2. Intersectionality***

I ground my study in the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought, with a particular focus on the concept of intersectionality. The concept is rooted in Black feminism, the women's liberation movement as well as the Black power and Third World feminism. It concerns itself with the following question: How can we think through structures of oppression without falling back to unitary explanations? As intersectionality stems from personal experiences and activist practice, it is not a distant theory but a widely known concept that influenced generations of feminists globally. Due to the emphasis on multilayered identities, I myself realized early when I came to political and feminist consciousness the dire need for intersectional approaches to activist practice as well as politics. Further, in the activist practice of feminists in Beirut, I did see the influence of intersectionality and Black feminist theory. I therefore argue

that intersectionality as a concept is crucial to understand feminist activists' ideas around feminism in the Lebanese context today. I hereby do not intend to compare Black feminists in the US with feminists in Lebanon, rather I am interested to understand how feminists in different contexts make use of these ideas in relation to their own struggles towards justice and liberation. In this section, I focus on the history of intersectionality as well as strategies intersectional feminists present as tools for activist practice.

#### 1.3.2.1. The History of Intersectionality

The main ideas constituting intersectionality appeared in a number of key texts published between the 1960s and 1980s, a period marked by social movement activism in the United States that heavily influenced the ideas of intersectionality scholarship today (Bilge and Collins 2016, p. 116). One of them is Frances Beal's essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (Beal, 1969) in which she analyzed the Black woman's role and position in society looking at different aspects, such as economic exploitation or violent practices regarding reproduction, of Black women's lived experience in comparison to the experience of white women, white men and Black men. Her critique targets both the sexism within the Black liberation movement and racism in the white feminist movement from a distinctly anti-capitalist viewpoint. Through her work, Beal significantly contributed to theorizing Black women's experiences within an intersectional framework. Another prominent contribution to early intersectional analyses is the Combahee River Collective's (CRC) "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977). The Collective was a community of Black, lesbian, socialist feminists, founded in 1973. They recognized the dimension of heterosexism as another structure of oppression and introduced the concept of oppressions as "interlocking", expanding the

existent body of work. This subsequently enabled a systematic analysis of race, gender, sexuality and class oppression, thus theorizing the location of Black lesbian women within overlapping systemic structures of oppression. Moreover, the statement is the first document that conceptualized identity politics as a tool of resistance (Bilge and Collins 2016, p. 121). Their concept of identity politics is based on their own “multilayered texture of black women’s lives“ (Combahee River Collective 1977). The CRC ultimately developed a theory grounded in personal experience from an activist standpoint, countering discourses that promote a binary between the personal and the political.

#### 1.3.2.2. Intersectionality and Activism

As the intersectional analysis is rooted in political and social activism, most scholars agree that this activism historically is triggered by personal experience of social and political grievances and the subsequent need to take action for change (Davis 1981, hooks 1984, Collins 2000). Considering intersectionality’s historical roots, two aspects are particularly crucial. First, it is vital to recognize the systemic nature of these mostly violent experiences as these are condoned, enforced and facilitated by the law and the state. Second, with intersectionality’s roots and its location especially in Black feminism, the inclusion and commemoration of remarkable figures play an extraordinary role. For example Angela Davis’ well-known work “Women, Race, Class” (1981) is extensively informed by her detailed research of personal accounts of countless remarkable Black women (and men), describing their lived realities in an effort to prove that their work and activism essentially paved the way to the debates we have today. The analysis of historic accounts and their revision by scholars like Davis, Collins and others showcased some commonly used activist strategies used especially

by Black women. From the numerous examples, the following four, identified by Ange-Marie Hancock, are particularly noteworthy. First, the political use of pain, trauma and personal lived experiences as a starting point for the fight for social justice. Second, strategic solidarity, as it had to be performed by Black women to end slavery. Third, building alliances with, for example, feminist as well as anti-racist movements. And finally, strategic visibility in order to advocate for a specific cause (Hancock 2016, pp. 66-71). I argue that today, these four strategies are still of utmost importance for feminist activists globally. These strategies inspired my own typology of feminist activism in Beirut. Within my fieldwork, I identified the use of all four among feminists in Beirut and examined them throughout the following chapters, focusing on alliances and strategic visibility as strategies of performed feminist activism.

#### **1.4 Methodology and Research Design**

To answer the presented research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study using mixed methods. The overall methodological framework consists of methods derived from the fields of biographical research as well as textual analysis. My primary tool of data collection were one-on-one interviews with 13 participants.

##### ***1.4.1. Positionality***

As the daughter of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, I grew up in Germany as an Arab, Muslim woman of color from a working class background in a white world which gave me a deeper understanding of the complexity of intersectional identities. Early on in my life, I had to learn that the system in which I grew up is not designed to benefit nor protect me. Structures of oppression like racism, classism and heterosexism in Germany are ubiquitous in any social or institutional context, leading to

institutionalized discrimination and violence. The experiences that resulted from this circumstance have essentially made me a feminist. However, coming from Germany and having had access to scholarships there, gave me the opportunity to pursue my graduate degree at the prestigious and costly American University of Beirut. While none of my family members in Lebanon ever had access to such an institution due to their socio-economic status, I ended up being the first person in my family to get a glimpse of what it means to be privileged in Lebanese society. With English and Arabic language skills and a Western education, it was easy for me to access Beirut's academic and cultural offering. This ultimately also opened the doors for my research in the framework of this thesis. As a feminist who shares similar values to the activists I worked with, I exhibit a certain proximity as well as access to the object of research. While I was not present within activist circles in Beirut in the past years and moved there recently, I have an ideological, cultural and socio-economic affinity to the activists I worked with. I see both advantages and disadvantages from this position, which I reflect on throughout this thesis.

As stated earlier, instead of applying a distant, purportedly neutral approach to the research project, I rather attempted to adopt a more reflexive lens, acknowledging myself as the researcher and part of the project. Bruce Berg (1998) notes that oftentimes researchers in qualitative studies report in detail their personal, autobiographical motivations to conduct the research at hand which may be related to the researchers' personal values, experiences, and traumas (Berg, 1998 p. 128). The initial motivation for me to pursue this project was rooted in my experiences and perception of the strong feminist presence within the Lebanese uprising of 2019. Not only were feminist activists visibly involved in the protests but they also formed an important part of the

leftist groups present on the streets. Further, I argue, they were part of the more inclusive actors active on the streets. Their efforts to build coalitions with a wide range of marginalized groups residing in Lebanon, such as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, migrant workers as well as the LGBTQ+ community and marginalized Lebanese in the North and South of the country, affected me and my thinking. Their progressive, radical and daring chants resounding through the streets of Beirut told stories of hopelessness and anger but also solidarity, love and a determination to radically change the system that oppresses the vast majority of people residing in Lebanon. In subsequence, I started reflecting on how solidarity forms a core issue for the feminists I encountered in the streets. This train of thought essentially triggered my interest to explore how feminism is lived, performed and conceptualized by feminists themselves in the context of Beirut. Throughout the process of conceptualizing and developing this research project, reflecting on my own positionality has been a constant exercise.

#### ***1.4.2. Biographical Research and Feminist Theory***

One of the main interests of this thesis is the relationship between theory and practice, more specifically, the relationship between theory and activism. In “Theory as Liberatory Practice“ (1991), bell hooks illustrated the significance of theorizing experiences from a place of pain, struggle and trauma. She did not claim that activism is more important than theory or vice versa. Rather, she argued that the practice of theorizing personal experiences is “liberatory“ because it serves the collective struggle. It makes experiences visible and creates vocabulary in order to understand and deconstruct structures of oppression. This thesis aims to do exactly that. By studying and understanding the personal life stories and motivations of feminist actors, I aim to

reveal the connections between the political practices of activists and their personal experiences .

#### 1.4.2.1. Biographical Research

This study draws on general ideas in biographical research, a qualitative research approach with a distinct focus on life histories and their reconstruction. Biographical approaches are used in a wide array of disciplines such as sociology, history, psychology, medicine and others. The approach can be utilized for projects with an interest in generating knowledge about the historical and social implications of structural and institutional processes of change. Further, it was used to explore how subjects deal with significant life events in the context of personal life histories (Völter, Dausien, et al. 2005, p. 7). Especially in the context of empirical biographical research within the discipline of sociology, biography is conceptualized as a social construct that produces patterns of individual structuring of experiences in the frame of social contexts. Thus, the individual as well as the social context are of high importance and subject to analysis. This analysis can vary according to the context of the research project, the theories, hypothesis and methods of use. With the focus on individual subjectivities, identity plays a significant role within the analytical framework of biographical research. Scholars Helma Lutz and Kathy Davis (2005) argued that biographical research is being used widely in the context of gender studies as a fruitful framework to analyze the gendered aspects of subjectivities, both on a personal level as well as the social constitution of gendered subjectivity.

I considered biographical research relevant for my research project since it allows me to get at what feminism means for individual activists through the personal narratives that they formulate about how they arrived to feminism and what it is that

constitutes activism for them. As elaborated, feminist and political activism is strongly related to personal motivations and histories. This is why the investigation of these personal stories is crucial in order to understand the conception of feminism in this specific context. By exploring personal stories, I expect to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex trajectories playing into feminist activism in Lebanon.

### ***1.4.3. Methods***

#### **1.4.3.1. Sample and Data Collection**

I conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with a focus on personal histories and narratives with feminist activists in Beirut. A feminist activist is anyone who is or was actively engaged and committed in the context of activism for gender equality in Beirut roughly over the past fifteen years. This timeframe uses the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a turning point in feminist activism as argued by Naber and Zaatari (2014). Focusing on Queer and feminist activism, the authors argued that the war and its aftermath led to a heightened moment of political activism in which activists conceptualized their critique in the light of the broader political context of imperialism as well as the Lebanese state system built on sectarianism, classism and racism (p. 92). This is relevant to my analysis since I set my focus on the feminist activists and groups within the movement who adopt an intersectional approach to feminism, which emerged especially during that time period. Further, I define “being actively engaged” loosely, it can mean anything from being a member of a group, initiative or working for an NGO, going to protests or writing but also less visible activities. While all participants did identify with the label feminist, not all participants call themselves activists. Some view themselves as organizers, others as neither. Having participated in the protests of the uprising especially alongside the feminist groups, I had the chance to meet, connect and

build loose relationships with a number of activists. Gaining access to the field came easy to me. Participants were primarily recruited through personal networks or direct outreach, some were recommended to me by other participants (snowballing). The fact of the shared political beliefs between me and the participants, as well as my familiarity with the political, social and economic context in Lebanon were helpful for me to build relationships and gain access.

Derived from feminist approaches to research respecting accountability processes as a part of the academic labour, I refer to those people I interviewed as participants or interlocutors (see Naber and Zaatari 2014 or Geiger 1990). This means that the process of knowledge production in this study is a collaboration between me and the participants. With the consent of the participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings were deleted after transcription. Following the IRB guidelines, all interviews were anonymized. While I understand the principle of anonymizing interviews, I would have preferred to follow a feminist approach that centers participants' voices by identifying who contributed the statements used. However, several participants do prefer staying anonymous and often felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts and knowledge with me knowing their names will not be mentioned. The interviews began with questions about the participants' life history, for example, about their upbringing, economic background, education but also their activism, political values and their path to feminist activism. Further questions revolved around the dynamics and infrastructure of activism and organizing in Beirut.

Reflecting on feminist oral history practices, Geiger (1990) emphasized the need to negotiate the terms of the relationship between researcher and participant focusing on power dynamics and shifting positions. During the interviews, I switched roles several

times and changed the interview style and questions in response to the person, the disclosed information and the topics they wanted to talk about. When speaking to people I knew well, they saw me as part of their networks or at least as an ally. They would refer to “our circles“ when talking about their activist networks, including me into these circles. Other participants I was less familiar with would see me as ideologically and politically close but would not see me as part of their circles. They consequently opened up more about their political and ideological views and oftentimes their personal biographical trajectories but would talk less about the specificities of the groups they organize with. These aspects have a great impact on the research outcomes and findings. Thereof with some participants, it was easy to connect emotionally and build a space in which they felt safe enough to share a great amount of detail, with others the interviews were more technical.

#### 1.4.3.2. Participants

Some perform their activism through paid labor as employees of NGOs or researchers working on issues related to gender justice as a general frame, others volunteer or address feminist issues in the framework of their universities in student clubs, others do neither and engage in feminist politics outside of their work place. The recruited participants were associated with the following groups and initiatives: the A Project, Dammeh cooperative, Meem and Nasawiya. Further, some of them worked or volunteered in and with the following NGOs: Anti Racism Movement, Haven for Artists, Kafa, Eгна Legna, Marsa and Human Rights Watch. Finally, two participants were members of the AUB secular club. Many participants were engaged in more than one of these groups, showing the flowing, dynamic nature of the feminist movement.

The connectivity of groups through people facilitates a feeling of shared identity as well as a common discourse and ideas. These then form into networks linked by a common agenda but also communities of care, solidarity, friendships and relationships.

As for the group of participants, I included young and rather inexperienced activists as well as more experienced ones working on feminist issues for years. Participants identified as queer, lesbian and straight. All participants identified as women or nonbinary. The youngest participant was 19 years old, the oldest one 40, the rest were located in-between with a balanced number of younger and older participants. The participants' nationalities are mainly Lebanese and included Palestinians as well as other nationalities from the MENA region, while two of the participants hold dual citizenships, including a Western one. Two participants grew up abroad in Western countries, two grew up in the MENA region, the others have spent their lives in Lebanon. All participants are based in Beirut or consider the city as the center of their lives.

#### 1.4.3.3. Language

All interviews were conducted in either English or Arabic but mostly a mix of both as is common in activist and academic circles in Beirut. Generally speaking, Arabic was often used to answer the personal questions around emotional topics and experiences. English was used for rather technical terms and political analysis. While code switching is very common in Beirut, I did see a shift among activist circles in Beirut during the popular uprising of October 17 to strengthen the Arabic language and use it more in political debates attempting to be more inclusive since code switching is used predominantly in privileged circles. This was also the case for the interviews I conducted in which Arabic was used more than expected. Language is an indicator of

class in Lebanon and is tightly linked to the classist and predominantly privatized educational system in which Arabic often plays a minor role especially in the case of prestigious and expensive private schools and universities such as the *American University of Beirut* (AUB), the *Lebanese American University* (LAU) and *Université Saint Joseph* (USJ) where English or French are the main languages of instruction. The shift in the use of language indicates efforts to be inclusive and a growing class consciousness in the context of the popular uprising. Being able to code switch like the participants, hence speaking the same language without any barriers or difficulties made it easy to connect with them on a personal level. To be able to use the interviews in the framework of this thesis, I translated selected Arabic direct quotes into English.

#### 1.4.3.4. Interview Style

The interviews were conducted over a period of around four weeks between October and November 2020. Each interview was around sixty to ninety minutes long. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. I chose semi-structured interviews to guarantee space for the interviewees to tell their stories and set their own topics and priorities in the framework of the main research question at hand. Since the research focuses on personal motivations and narratives, I considered this to be the most suitable approach compared to focus groups. In practice, I entered the interviews with a list of prepared questions and changed the interview style and questions sometimes according to the person I was interviewing in reaction to the information they chose to share with me and the topics they wanted to talk about. The entry point to the interviews was always personal, including a narrative collection of the participants' life history via questions on their upbringing, economic background, education but also their activism, political values and specific experiences in life focusing on what exactly led them to

become feminist. Further questions revolved around the dynamics and infrastructure of activism and organizing in Beirut. Some chose to focus on the personal aspects and some more on the political ones. Being aware of my responsibility as a researcher, I tried as much as possible to create a harm-free environment. Many questions were very broad and vague, especially the personal ones, which gave the participants room to talk about what they felt comfortable sharing. By sharing personal stories and anecdotes from my life, it often felt more like a conversation or an exchange rather than a static interview, which I enjoyed. The interviews took place partly in-person and partly online. Initially, I planned to attend meetings, gatherings, protests or other forms of communal activity in order to add participant observation to my method of data collection. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the social distancing restrictions in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, with the interviews I also hope to have created a space of reflection and evaluation of the past months and years of organizing for the participants.

#### 1.4.3.5. Data Analysis and Coding

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them between November and December 2020. Transcribing the interviews and hearing all accounts again was a good way of becoming more familiar with my data. I transcribed the interviews verbatim to capture nuances of the accounts that might have otherwise gotten lost, such as hesitations but also banter or feelings. I hence entered the coding process with preliminary ideas of what the main points of interest will be. During the process of coding, this fundamentally changed. I applied a line-by-line open coding approach and was quickly overwhelmed by the amount of information. Each of the 13 interviews consisted of about 20 to 25-page documents, resulting in around 300 pages. In order to

structure, highlight and comment on the pages, I used the Microsoft Word tools. In this step, I identified general themes and relevant quotes, as well as general technical information the participants provided me with.

Second, drawing on general ideas of critical discourse analysis (CDA) by Siegfried Jäger (2001), I identified what Jäger calls “collective symbols”, or codes. These codes are understood as a repertoire of collective images, which trigger reactions and emotions within societies. Cultural stereotypes used collectively are the basis of collective symbols, they connect statements with experiences and feelings. (Jäger 2001, p. 6). Examples for codes are: “justice”, “coming out”, “anger”, “agency”, “atheism”, “rape culture”, “respectability politics”, “bougie”, “the west”, “fascist”, “toxic culture”, “elitist”, “clique-ish”, “solidarity”, “community”, “visibility”, “co-education”. I went through the first few interviews and coded and highlighted what seemed relevant without having a particular system. To cluster codes into themes, understand my data better and eventually translate ideas, concepts and words into knowledge, I used a pinboard. The visualization of the data helped me familiarize myself with the data.

After an insecure beginning of the coding process, I started to immerse myself in it. By the time I came to code the fourth interview, I realized I was finally able to let it guide me by truly focusing on what has been said instead of over-interpreting the information. Kurt Wolff (1991) calls this process “to surrender“. Applied to the research process, Wolff made it clear that the researcher has to trust the data and should in no way distort data with pre-selection, misleading hypotheses or unrealistic expectations. Only if the researchers allow themselves to lose control, are they able to fathom the scope of the data. By applying this approach, I realized that the data guided me instead of trying to guide the data myself in order to fit it into pre-conceived notions of what I

wanted to write about. Later, in a second step, I was able to cluster the codes into themes. I identified eight themes: “Personal Aspects and Community”, “Themes and Values”, “Structures of Oppression”, “State and Society”, “Activist Practice and Performativity”, “Thawra and the Movement”, “Critique of Feminist Organizing” and “Context”. These general themes were the baseline on which I based the outline of this thesis. This is how the thesis took a different turn and went in a new direction. I learnt how to value the individuality of each participant. Although they might work and organize together and share similar goals and values, their ideas and sequence of arguments varied immensely. Hence, another point of interest became the idea of how these different motivations, thoughts and reasoning made sense when put together. Finally, during the coding process, I used a second document to write down all ideas for chapters or arguments I might have had. In case I already had an idea for a paragraph or an argument I immediately wrote it down instead of waiting for the coding process to end. This dialectical approach follows the idea of writing with the data, making the process more intuitive and smoother instead of static, overly pre-set and controlled (Richardson, 2003). The goal was to present an analysis as close to the data as possible and contextualizing the data appropriately.

#### 1.4.3.6. Additional material

My final tool of data inquiry was textual analysis of existing text-based material such as articles, blog posts, videos, interviews, podcasts and social media posts by and about activists to complement the data derived from the interviews. I conducted a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis of media content of feminist outlets like the magazine *Kohl Journal*, the blog *Sawt el Niswa* or the publication *Bareed Mesta3jil* both in English and Arabic. The analysis specifically focused on activists’ narratives,

rhetoric and political analyses. I understood this material as an attempt to create counter-narratives to dominant discourses of mainstream media in Lebanon. The practice of writing and publishing is taken as an activist practice here. This enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the links between personal narratives and the performativity of activism. Textual analysis of first and secondary sources outside the interviews accompanied and complemented the findings from the interviews and did not constitute a main tool of data collection.

## CHAPTER 2

### FEMINISM AS A SENSE OF SELF: ON FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

#### 2.1 Introduction

*“Becoming a feminist involves coming up against  
the world.”*

(Sara Ahmed 2017,  
p. 45)

A debate, a political scandal, war, a protest movement, a friend. The triggers that politicize people are varied. In the Lebanese context, it seems like people are born highly politicized due to the complex political context and the predominance of political issues shaping life in Lebanon on a daily basis. In parallel to their political awakening, many feminist activists describe an almost simultaneous process of growing into feminist awareness. In this process of becoming a feminist, scholar Sara Ahmed (2017) essentially sees a process of making sense of things that happen. By telling her own stories in her work, she grounds her feminism and the theories she (re)produces, in the process of making sense of the world around her. Her activism was hence born out of an understanding of the world and triggered by the necessity to resist and fight against it. Black feminists argued that becoming a feminist is often triggered by an incident that has caused a feeling of great injustice due to gendered discrimination or mistreatment. Accordingly, feminist writer, activist and professor bell hooks explained how she grew to be a feminist through her personal experience:

“Growing up in a Southern, black, father-dominated, working-class household, I experienced (as did my mother, my sisters, and my brother) varying degrees of patriarchal tyranny, and it made me angry- it made us all angry. Anger led me to

question the politics of male dominance and enabled me to resist sexist socialization” (hooks 1984, p. 11).

For people who experience multi-layered oppression in various ways, such as black women, feminist awareness is not learnt or taught, hooks argued, but rather developed through personal experiences and the resistance against it. She explicitly mentions the affectedness of her brother, showing that not only the female members of her family suffered from the patriarchal environment in her home. She thus illustrated how patriarchal structures work to oppress men as well. Further, she spoke of the anger that followed the mistreatment her family had to endure. In her case, this anger led to politicization as an immediate reaction, and resistance as a consequence. Her process of politicization was gendered as it led her to “question the politics of male dominance”. Consequently, being political and being a feminist can be mutually dependent. On what drives people to feminism, Sara Ahmed writes:

“The histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile. Feminism might pick up (or more hopefully pick us up) from the experiences that leave us vulnerable and exposed. Feminism: how we survive the consequences of what we come up against by offering new ways of understanding what we come up against” (Sara Ahmed 2017, p. 49).

Following Sara Ahmed, feminism accrues from both a need to heal and to understand, and fulfills a mission to resist and bring change. Further, feminism begins and touches us in the most intimate of instances, the ones that shake us to the core and essentially shape the way we live, move, look, talk, the very way we exist. Feminist theory, in a sense, is the manual that follows from these experiences, helping us navigate the world, helping us understand our own and the collective experiences that happen to us, providing us with the tools to deconstruct and fight the power dynamics that dominate our lives. These are the notions on which I build this thesis. I open this chapter at the core of the personal, in the sphere of the subjective, tracing activists’

general motivations and driving factors behind their feminist activism. I therefore ask, *How do feminist activists conceptualize their feminism?* As my methodology is grounded in the personal narrations of activists, I focus on their personal backgrounds and argue that while feminist activism is grounded in activists' personal experiences, their activism constitutes an outlet, in reaction to a need to act. By centering the participants' personal backgrounds, political values and their point of entry to activism, I got an understanding about the ways in which activists conceptualize their work and their proclaimed trajectories. I was especially interested to find out more about the activists' personal reasoning for why they sacrifice so much of their time and energy, jeopardizing personal safety and mental health, to be organizing and working on the topics they care about.

## **2.2. On Becoming a Feminist**

“You know, [the protest march] ‘Fight Rape’ was an eye opening moment. You know why? Even though we are in a feminist movement and we talk about these things all time... The amount of women who cried in that protest, it was very sobering. Because you see the people you meet every day- and then suddenly you see their past. And, yeah, it’s... always so sobering.” This is a quote by an older participant who has been involved in feminist organizing for a long time, answering my question about an eye-opening moment she experienced. Significantly, she explained how even after years of dealing with the issues of gender-based violence, harassment and reproductive injustice, it is moments like those that clarify her vision in regard to the importance of the work, reminding her of what she is actually fighting for and why she keeps on doing what she does, despite all the pain. I argue that most activists feel an urge to act, fighting the injustices they are enraged about and hence using their activism as an

outlet. Subsequently, I see those feelings as the driving factors behind their activism. The activists' accounts tell stories of anger, pain, guilt, shame, frustration and vulnerability as a reaction to the oppression they have experienced and witnessed throughout their lives. Further, many embedded their activism in passion, love, compassion and kindness.

In this chapter, I trace and categorize the participants' feelings and experiences, interpreting them as the driving force for their activism. Since the group of participants varied between young and old, Lebanese and non-Lebanese, queer and straight, as well as people who grew up abroad, answers differed. What can be said about all participants is that the central political value they all aspire is social justice. Even though all participants are part of the feminist movement, the ways in which they discovered feminism were numerous. One significant observation I drew from the interviews is that the injustice that triggered the participants' feminist and political awareness usually heavily influences their future activist trajectories. I therefore argue that the personal injustices activists face and witness throughout their lives are crucial to understand their activism. This means that for activists who grew up in poverty, economic justice and the intersection of economic oppression and sexism played a crucial role in their activism. For queer activists, the issue of LGBTQ+ rights was of high importance and for activists who are non-Lebanese, the topics citizenship and racism and the gendered dimensions thereof were crucial. Needless to say, centering specific issues based on personal experiences does not mean other issues were deemed unimportant to these activists. Rather, these personal experiences served as the grounds from which activists started getting involved and developed a consciousness for other issues and the links between all of these issues.

In this section, I will present snippets of personal political awakening. These examples highlight the ways in which personal experiences triggered activists' political trajectories in multiple aspects, opening up feminist debates and activist potentialities. To allow a better understanding of their motivations, lived realities and contexts, I decided to leave the direct quotations in this section longer than in the rest of this thesis.

### ***2.2.1. Society, Sectarianism and Gender Roles***

One participant explained to me how the way she grew up in a women's household with her mother and sister, without a father made her question patriarchal societal norms:

“I think it [my political awakening] was both, it was a process and a development, but also, there was like, one specific moment that I can recall. And you know, how, specifically if you're living only with women, in an actual family, and you don't have a father... Or, if you don't have a father, you can just get used to it. But somehow, the world always reminds you ‘Oh, that's so abnormal or unnatural’. So it was a process to always say no, but I'm fine surviving. What's wrong with that? And why do you insist it's unnatural? So it is a process and also reflecting on... Specifically my mother's attitudes specifically during our puberty or teenage years... she wouldn't mind if we go out or if we dressed a certain way and that always made me reflect and say hmm, I'm actually glad we don't have a father because I know that fathers can be quite conservative.”

Importantly, in her statement she pointed out two things. First, although her social environment made it clear that her family structure is not common, for her, growing up without a father has always been a normal circumstance. Further, she elaborated how this fact might have even granted her more freedom than if she had grown up with a father. This assumption is based on the idea that fathers and men in general play a significant role in controlling and maintaining patriarchal societal relations from within the nuclear family. In the Lebanese context, this is even more significant as this role is enshrined in the Lebanese law, as kinship is based on blood relations and exclusively depends on the father. Accordingly, children automatically

inherit the sectarian identity and last name of their father (UNDP 2009, p. 72).

Discrimination against women is thus reinforced based on the fact that patriarchal social structures are codified by law, which both assigns and affirms discriminatory gender roles. The same participant continued with:

“But I think one awakening moment was when... I think 2016 or 2015 when I had just finished my first year of university, and I was having like a very religious phase, and I was going to wear the veil and so on. And I was in an abusive relationship, in a very patriarchal sense. And then I remember like, suddenly, I started reading, stuff like feminist writers, and I read *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir. And it really made sense... It really made sense to me why I always feel that, okay, what I'm doing is actually unnatural. And why should I do it? Why do I have to do it if I don't want to or whatever? So that was an awakening moment. But I would say that it was also equally a process or a development throughout my upbringing.”

This participant's story shows how a general feeling of discomfort sometimes can be a first step towards awareness. She was not the only participant who told me how their feminist awareness was shaped through the painful experience of abusive romantic relationships. In the darkness of intimacy and “the private sphere”, gender-based abuse and violence often go unnoticed. Especially as society promotes and supports toxic heteronormative behavioural patterns, they are often difficult to point out. After she experienced affirmation through feminist literature, something changed as she acquired the vocabulary to name her discomfort and the mechanisms behind it. Further, it is important to point out the university setting, thus the access to feminist literature as an important factor in this process towards feminist awareness. To me, this participant's story is a story of resisting the pressure to conform to the predominant patriarchal standards. She came to feminism by way of not giving into the standards she does not agree with and finding a language to name them.

### ***2.2.2. Bodily Autonomy and Cultural Sensitivity***

Another activist who grew up and studied in the West then moved to Beirut years later, reflected on her feminist stances against the backdrop of her lived experiences between the West and Lebanon. Being aware of patriarchal societal standards, she wondered how to open up and have conversations on feminist issues in an effective, culturally sensitive way, without falling prey to promoting Western feminist ideals. She said:

“Things like... clothing and being in public spaces for example, occupying those spaces... I think for me is an important feminist conversation... If I go out and I look like a hoe because I want to look like a hoe, I don't find it revolutionary; [...] But I think there is a need to have a conversation about that [...] As a feminist, this is an important element for me to think about. So public space... Obviously, body harassment and bodily entitlement. People think they have this entitlement to your body, not judging just men's sexual entitlement, but all people's entitlement to your body. Even things like what you're eating and where you're going, and how. Whether it's from your family or your friends... There's a lot of invasiveness... And I want to have these conversations in ways that are also culturally sensitive. Like I don't want us to be like the West with these things. I don't want this individualism, but I want us to understand how we can have more freedom in these areas while maintaining the cultural elements that make our community relations and family relations unique and dynamic... I don't want someone to take a piece of food and stuff it in my mouth [...] Just how we maintain respect for each other's bodies... [...] I love the community care and the food culture that we have... But especially women's bodies are seen as something to always be... like commented on, fixed, fed, all of these things, kind of inserts itself in the cultural practice. And I want to remove that. I don't want to remove the fact that my grandmother cares if I ate. I love that my grandmother cares if I ate; I just don't want her to force me to have 5 plates.”

The experiences of living between Lebanon and the West are reflected by her way of thinking through feminist demands by respecting the Lebanese context she lives in. With her statement, she showed how the right to bodily autonomy should be talked about in various contexts beyond harassment and violence. She linked it to society's entitlement to women's bodies that manifests in a myriad of ways, such as specific comments on their bodies or even Lebanese food culture. Following her argument, acts

that are generally considered to be acts of kindness and care can be inherently intrusive. The ever looming question *Where are you going and with whom?*, usually directed at girls and women, carries a strong component of attempting to control not only women's mobility but also their societal environment. More importantly, it limits women's control over their own time and life decisions. While the question itself may be coming from a place of care and safety, it is oftentimes used as a tool to exercise control and is therefore intrusive in nature. Critiquing the habit of asking this specific question may seem insignificant, yet deconstructing it indicates its actual use as a tool to maintain a larger patriarchal social order in which women's lives are controlled and limited even in the most private and intimate social relations. Just like in the previous example these seemingly intimate and private issues are in fact structural and affect not only women but society as a whole. By way of asking how feminist conversations like this one can happen in a way that is culturally sensitive, the participant attempts to trigger awareness and change from within society, where she sees they are needed. She ultimately posed the question on how to include respect for each other's bodies, lives and needs into everyday life. I think her demand to shift our understanding of care towards the notion of respecting each other's bodies might be useful in the context of broad, macro social debates.

### ***2.2.3. Feminism and Economic Justice***

As described in the previous chapter, women in Lebanon are severely restricted in regard to economic participation. Another participant told me how the way she grew up in poverty, without any access to economic rights, essentially politicized her and made her a feminist:

“I grew up, bel Chiyah, in Beirut. It's pretty... I don't want to say conservative, but it's pretty restrictive for women's mobility, primarily, young girls mobility as well. And very much, justified in the kind of... power authority of you know Haraket Amal in the area, I think sectarianism is very important when we talk about, you know, feminism or any kind of framework in Lebanon, and kind of how it has emboldened men to police women's bodies as they wish... Growing up, my mother passed away when I was 10. And my father left the house when my mother passed away. So it was me and my sisters. We lived in the same building as relatives, but because, my father was still alive, they felt like, they can't interfere in family matters. So they basically left us on our own. And that was very difficult on many, many levels [...] We were very young and we all have to kind of find ways to divide tasks, which just kind of compounded the restrictions that we would have faced, especially economic oppression, economic abuse, I would call it. So in a sense, I think, for me, feminism was very much innate, it wasn't that I was, you know, able to access all of these theories, but it was very much informed by my lived experience very much, you know, a survival mechanism [...] I didn't understand why, you know, patriarchal structures in my family meant that I have to take permission, first of all for myself, and then from, you know, the elders and then from society to live my life in that sense. So it was very much like, a resistance to that, and kind of an attempt to change those conditions for myself and also for my sisters, because I saw these struggles on multiple levels.”

This participant is essentially marked by her lived reality of economic oppression and its direct link to her gender. She elaborated on how these two factors contributed to profound limitations of her ability to access economic rights, mobility and personal freedoms. Her account exemplified the relationship between sectarianism as both, a political state order and a social order that is inherently patriarchal and oppressive against women. This is manifested prominently due to the father's and family's absence as well as the lack of state support. It is noteworthy that while she was socially isolated and excluded as she grew up without parents and family support, she was still subjected to the societal mechanisms that restrict women. The absence of both, the family and the state, prove the state's negligence towards its population, and especially the most vulnerable parts of society. Women and children are by law put in

precarious positions, which make them vulnerable to economic, physical and political violence and abuse. She further said:

“And also, I realized I was queer, which was very interesting. I think it was really like an afterthought. So I don't think I had any kind of struggle on being queer. First of all, I didn't feel like I need to come out to anyone.. my sisters were very supportive, but also, because of the kind of, you know, range of struggle specifically, you know, like, not like being poor, basically not having access to... to livelihood, it was kind of an afterthought to think about my queer identity and stuff like that.”

This participants' account is one example of the ways in which struggles intersect.

However, while struggles intersect, in her case the factor of queerness was not significant. Due to this participants' severe economic disadvantage and harsh limitations, her queerness had to play a lesser role as she did not have the space to factor it into her struggle to survive. As poverty was a crucial part of her lived reality, economic justice became an integral part in her political struggle, as she pointed out throughout our conversation.

#### ***2.2.4. War, Queerness and Sectarianism***

War, including the experiences of growing up and coming of age during and after the Civil War in the 1990s, the July War of 2006<sup>2</sup> and the constantly vulnerable political situation in Lebanon were recurrent themes within the interviews. Naturally,

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<sup>2</sup> Alternatively authors speak of the “2006 Lebanon War“, “The 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon“ or other terms, depending on the speakers' perspective. I use the term “July War“ as it is commonly used in Lebanon and by the participants within the interviews. The term describes the month long armed conflict (July 12 until August 14, 2006) between Israel and Lebanon and the following Israeli blockade of Lebanon that ended in September 2006. In Lebanon, the war cost the lives of more than 1200 civilians, wounded 4400 and displaced more than a million people especially from Southern Lebanon (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The war further destroyed large amounts of Lebanese infrastructure, including power plants, the airport, factories, hundreds of schools, roads, hospitals and is the reason for major pollution of its shores due to 15,000 tons of oil spill from the destruction of a power plant (Naber and Zaarari, 2014).

they were mostly mentioned by the older participants whose lived realities are significantly marked by these experiences, influencing their political thinking and activist trajectories. In the following account, one participant talks about her experiences of being a young lesbian in post-war Lebanon and recalls her political awakening amidst the 2006 war:

“Before 2006, I was quite conservative in my thinking, kind of sectarian even.. I grew up in a very closed kind of community until the war happened [...] And I had always grown up queer but... As you know, it was difficult in the 90s. It wasn't... we didn't see it as a political or social issue. We were just trying to survive [...] So yeah, I was queer, but I never thought of my suffering or my challenges as connected to other things until the 2006 war [...] I used to go sometimes to Helem in Zico House and at the time, Helem was kind of taken over by all these groups doing relief work. And so I was worried about the books there. It was very rare to find gay books and gay DVDs at the time [...] So I used to take some stuff home and hide it there and I started to just kind of watch and read, educating myself [...] And because I'm from Hadath which is you know, at the border of Dahye, I was literally watching these bombs drop. And I was feeling so incredibly embarrassed that... I didn't understand any of this and I didn't understand why it's safe for me... like what are these demarcation lines? To be honest, I used to live in a very isolated societal environment, I didn't even know the difference between Sunnis and Shi'ites. I was 24 and I had no idea so I decided to... you know, educate myself and learn about all these things. So that was the moment I decided to be interested in politics.”

What I found remarkable about this participant's account was the way she casually linked her queerness and struggle to survive to her witnessing of the precarity and misery of the 2006 war and sectarian tensions. As these topics were usually talked about separately, she connected them as they all significantly marked her lived reality, thinking and political awareness. In the course of this, the experiences of the 2006 war as a heightened moment of political awareness are significant. This activist got acquainted with politics out of a pressing necessity to understand the societal and political environment she lived in at that time. Due to the war and violence around her, she realized she did not have the privilege not to engage with politics. Related to that,

she understood that staying uninformed about the political and social relations in the country was actually dangerous as this understanding was relevant to learn how to navigate the overall political situation as well as life during war.

In parallel to this participant's account, Naber and Zaatari (2014), assessed the 2006 war as a moment of heightened political activism that led to the formation of a feminist and queer social movement built in resistance against "the US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon 2006". The authors argued that this moment led queer feminists to conceptualize their analysis in a broader context of Western imperialism and war in relation to Lebanese nation state structures such as sectarianism, classism and racism (Naber and Zaatari 2014, p. 92). Methodologically, they chose an approach similar to mine and grounded their findings on nine interviews with queer feminist activists. Their analysis was a counter-argument to the binary image of the West as gay-friendly, safe haven for poor, oppressed queers from the global south. This argument was built on queer and feminist voices that highlighted the ways in which Western imperialism harmed specifically those whom they claim to save. Importantly, by looking at the queer feminist critique that emerged during the 2006 war, the authors traced back the ways in which concepts and practices around family, gender and sexuality were significantly shaped taking into account the power structures and forms of violence that worked together, including classism, sectarianism, militarism, imperialism (ibid., p. 96). These notions were backed and reflected by two of my participants who also emphasized the importance of Helem's headquarters in Hamra that was used as shelter and meeting point for several relief initiatives for people affected by the war. While the provided examples portrayed personal stories of four activists, their statements speak to the lived realities of many. All stories exemplified the ways in which activists' feminist

awareness grew out of everyday situations and a feeling of discomfort around some of these situations that oftentimes cannot be named at first. Understanding the nuances and motivations behind everyday acts and questions that are largely both normalized and institutionalized in social relations and interactions was hence a significant part of growing into feminist awareness. Here, the importance of class is especially noteworthy, both as a factor activists are aware of due to personal experiences of poverty, as well as a factor that is important in the process to feminist consciousness. Moreover, the stories show that personal lived experiences not only form the driving force but more importantly significantly contribute to shaping the activists' perspectives, political thinking and activist trajectories. Finally, the stories demonstrate once again the importance of understanding concepts, events and critiques in light of the power structures present, as they are all shaped by militarism, precarity, imperialism, sectarianism, racism, sexism and the ways in which they work together.

### **2.3. Feminism and Secularism**

In the Lebanese context, marked by sectarianism as a political system and social order, the topics of religion and secularism were often mentioned in the interviews; as part of participants' everyday life, their upbringing or their political beliefs. This is not surprising as the political and social discourses prevalent within many civil society and activist groups demand an end of the sectarian system and uphold and promote the ideas of secularism. Most participants described their upbringing as conservative. In the Lebanese context, conservatism is often linked to religion and a sectarian political stance. It can also be influenced by religion as a moral framework without being necessarily religious or sectarian in nature. In addition, many participants attested that they grew up religiously. Some were active in different religious youth groups or scouts

linked to their local Christian or Muslim communities and religious institutions. However, today most participants identified as secular and many as atheist. Several participants used sentences like “back when I was still religious“, which was usually followed by laughter.

The Lebanese context is marked by war, sectarian tensions and a sectarian political system that is inherently patriarchal (Mikdashy, 2014). Deema Kaedbey argued that while religion and sectarian belonging have not been an important element within the feminist and queer activist discourse, “secularism, largely a reaction to sectarianism and sectarian wars, is dominant within civil society and activist groups in Lebanon” (Kaedbey 2014, p. 15). Secularism and atheism within the Lebanese feminist activist discourse serve as a counter-narrative to political sectarianism, as well as conservative political views. Secularism can be hence considered a relevant element of the feminist critique in Lebanon. This is even more the case in queer activist circles where being religious is often considered an antithesis to being queer. These views are rooted in the oppression and dreadful personal experiences of violence, discrimination, criminalization and exclusion queer people face on a daily basis by religious institutions, the state, society and personal environments. Commenting on the topic, one participant told me:

“I think because there is no space that allows for some sort of negotiation process between religion and sexuality, regardless of Christian or Muslim, queer folks in Lebanon face two options: They either decide to be true to themselves and to leave religion behind or.. Actually I have never seen anyone who was gay and religious.”

However, several participants described negotiation processes with religion. One described how her negotiation process with religion began during adolescence, stating her biggest problem with Islam is how it framed how to lead one’s life in every aspect.

“You get to a point where you feel like religion doesn’t only affect you in the way you pray to god or how you go to the mosque or fasting and praying, that’s not even the point. It’s more that religion provides a complete framing how to live your life, your relationships, how and whom to marry, how to divorce, your relationship with your parents.”

Many told me the process of politicization and feminist awakening for them was linked to a process of questioning oneself and the ideas they grew up with. As sectarianism in many forms, such as by virtue of sectarian belonging or the creation of sectarian identities by birth, is deeply embedded within Lebanese society, questioning oneself also constitutes questioning the very foundation of the political system. Secularism has therefore been a key element on the feminist agenda with a clear anti-sectarian stance.

On the other hand, another participant described how she approached feminism through the lens of Islamic feminism. In the context of the campaign demanding a law against domestic violence around the years 2012 until 2014<sup>3</sup>, she found out there was a “structured Islamic movement“ against the implementation of a domestic violence bill which triggered the beginning of her feminist activism.

“The reasons [for the opposition movement against the law] didn’t add up to me. It didn’t make sense to me. So this was the thing that kind of led me to call myself a Muslim feminist. There is a need for this kind of label because for these right-leaning people who organized the opposition against the bill as well as for the people who organized the protests for the bill, Islamic feminism is an oxymoron. So I said I do believe in this [religion]. I do identify with Islam. But I also think it [domestic violence] is not right.”

This activist identified as a Muslim feminist particularly to oppose powers that according to her are “right-leaning” and that continue to oppress women, trivializing the

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<sup>3</sup> After years-long efforts and campaigning by civil society groups, prominently amongst them women’s rights organization Kafa, the Lebanese parliament introduced a law that aims to protect women from domestic violence. The law was passed despite political and religious efforts to stop its implementation. However, it is widely critiqued due to a lack of efficiency to tackle the pressing issue (Moussawi and Yassin, 2017).

consequences and victims of domestic violence. In this context, “right-leaning” refers to powers who justify their harmful political stances with religion and religious reasoning. Further, she used this specific label to oppose voices arguing that Islam in itself is misogynistic. Interestingly, several participants mentioned the use of specific labels in connection to their feminism to highlight a specific part of their identity occasionally. For example a participant who works for an NGO told me she specifically labels herself as a queer feminist in settings that are rather conservative. She uses the label as a political statement, speaking out of a defined oppositional positionality. The case of the Muslim feminist is similar, the label is used as an identity marker, speaking out of her position as a Muslim feminist to face actors and discourses that oppose her stance justified with a certain religious reasoning. These labels are hence used strategically and situationally, depending on the audience. However, she told me now, years later, she does not feel comfortable labelling herself as a Muslim feminist anymore.

“Today, I don’t know if I would still call myself a Muslim feminist. I definitely ascribe to queer feminism. I don’t have a problem identifying as a Muslim but the thing is that Muslim feminists usually work within the Islamic framework which I am not really doing anymore. So I think I would, I could identify – yeah I wouldn’t identify as a Muslim feminist.”

Over time, activists’ identities hence change as well as their politics. As argued, secularism is a key element of the feminist critique in Lebanon. By calling themselves feminist and secular, often as both, a political and a social ascription, feminist activists contextualize their feminism by directly relating it to the political system in Lebanon. This label of a secular feminist thus carries a clear political agenda that goes beyond being a feminist. Based on this analysis, I argue that being a feminist in Lebanon in most cases means being anti-sectarian. This is especially significant considering the

ways in which sectarianism, enshrined in personal status laws, institutionally discriminates against women in Lebanon, as explained before.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I focused on processes of growing into feminist consciousness by tracing activists' personal stories. One significant observation was that the instances of injustice that triggered participants' feminist awareness usually influenced their future activist trajectories and foci. These themes usually form the take-off point from which they gain an awareness for other injustices and the links between them. The participants recounted personal stories touching on different topics, such as societal gendered norms, economic justice, growing up in times of war, or the political and societal framework of sectarianism. Questioning especially gendered dimensions behind everyday acts that are largely normalized and institutionalized in social relations and interactions constitutes a significant part of growing into feminist awareness. Further I found that class consciousness is a relevant factor of growing into feminist consciousness. Another finding was that secularism and a clear opposition to sectarianism as a political system is a key element of feminist consciousness in Beirut.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN BEIRUT: DYNAMICS, STRUCTURES AND POLITICS

#### 3.1. Introduction

Building on the previous chapters, the ways in which feminist activists approach feminism and relate to the political system is especially important when zooming out of the subjective sphere of activists' personal reasoning and motivations into the sphere of the collective. To examine the common strategies and goals of the feminist movement in Beirut, in this chapter, I attempt a general characterization of the movement, along the lines of the question: *What are the dynamics and structures that shape contemporary feminist organizing in Beirut?* By considering feminist activists in Beirut as part of a broader movement, I aim to identify common practices and outline the institutional infrastructure of feminist organizing. I am further interested in various aspects of sustainable movement building, especially the issues of funding and community-building.

I open the chapter with a discussion of notions of “radical“ and “liberal“ feminism by using the example of a recent media controversy. I then explore the trend of “NGO-ization” of feminist and gender-oriented activism in Beirut, focusing on the critique of the de-politicization of women’s rights activism. Here, I consider various aspects of NGO work, such as exclusivity, funder-grantee relations, the hierarchization of organizations, sustainability of work, and the issue of privilege. I further establish links to global debates on NGOization by way of critiquing “the Human Rights discourse” and argue for the need of South-South conversations on this and related

issues. As another key aspect of feminist organizing, I will discuss community and its significance to feminist activists. Here, I highlight the position and function of different feminist groups in relation to community work and movement building. The chapter closes with a discussion of points of contention and critique within feminist organizing as voiced by the participants.

### **3.2. Good Feminism versus Bad Feminism? Characterizing the Feminist Movement in Beirut**

In December 2020, Rémie Akl, a Lebanese artist known for her well-crafted, aesthetically appealing videos on Social Media, released a video titled “بقلاوة المرأة”-Baklava got legs” (Akl, 2020). In the video she problematized sexual harassment and violence against women. Here, Akl used Baklava, a traditional Arab dessert, as a metaphor to refer to women. In doing so, she appropriated the term that is mostly used by men as a pick-up line for women that many interpret as offensive, derogatory and sexist. In the video, she centered men and addressed them, asking them to keep women safe and shaming them for causing an environment of fear and danger in the public sphere as well as in the privacy of homes. The video was part of the “Safety for Safekeepers #أمان\_صانعة” campaign and was commissioned by the NGO *ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality*, a UN ECOSOC accredited organization working on “gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable social and economic development in the MENA region” (Abaad 2021). The fact that Abaad is officially accredited by the UN lends it a more official character and a sense of international legitimacy that grants it privileges other feminist organizations in Lebanon do not have. Strikingly, the response to the video was overwhelming. It got around four million views on Instagram alone and was shared widely. Interestingly, it was even shared by

friends of mine outside of Lebanon, proving that it touched people in different ways across different contexts. Abaad's standing as a UN accredited organization, might have contributed to this success, but also, significantly, to its local detraction.

Quickly, local feminist took to social media to voice critiques of Akl and her approach as an instance of "liberal feminism", meaning a feminist approach that is willing to compromise with power by centering men and asking them to treat women better. The feminist page *Akhbar al-Saha*<sup>4</sup> published a video on instagram in response, titled "البقلاوة فيديو على رداً" (Akhbar al-Saha, 2020). In the video, they harshly criticized women's rights organizations like Abaad that accept funding, awards and international recognition in exchange for the modification of their demands to suit donors' wishes. Therefore, Akhbar Alsaaha called their approach "shit" and "dangerous". They further labeled the practice of trying to address men to change their behavior as "begging for rights", arguing that it undermines feminists' and women's century-long fight for justice. The main point of critique here was clearly the rather appeasing approach to the issue in order to be heard and taken seriously instead of a more clear, aggressive language. Further, in the formulation of their critique of Abaad's use of respectability politics, Akhbar Alsaaha made use of strong language and swear words. In parallel to Akl's use of Baklava, Akhbar Alsaaha mockingly used a repetitive metaphor as well: خرا, the Arabic word for "shit". The practice of critiquing Akl's tamed, calm, peaceful and appeasing presence by using a strong language, discourses and performing in a way to

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<sup>4</sup> Akhbar al-Saha أخبار الساحة, is a news platform founded by feminist activists in 2015 with the aim to challenge dominant discourses around civil rights movements in Lebanese media (Lteif, 2020). It is specialized on reports and information on protests and mobilization, relying on anonymous volunteer reporters around the country. They are active especially on Twitter and Facebook and use Instagram for social and political commentary through videos and art. In the context of the popular uprising of October 2019, it has gained prominence and a wider audience due to their real time reporting of raw footage of civil society mobilization throughout the country (ibid.)

break taboos is a common feminist strategy to counter so-called “respectability politics”. By that I mean civil rights activism that presents itself in a way that is considered “respectable” by society and hence does not appear threatening to dominant structures of power. Examples for countering respectability politics are numerous, such as female activists and artists who prominently uncover their breasts in public or perform art with their period blood in an attempt to de-sexualize the female body. I have noticed this strategy also on the streets of Beirut when feminists chanted for reproductive justice, against heterosexism and for the right to bodily autonomy and safety and with these demands, often breaking taboos of what is considered acceptable in Lebanese society.

Akl’s video closed with a statement directed to men: “I want nothing from you, nothing at all. But when I give to you, look at me, see me, feel and reciprocate. I am a Safekeeper. What about you?”. Akhbar Alsaha’s video parodized this last sentence into: “I don’t give a fuck if you see me or not. Don’t touch me: whether it is to harass, beat or kill.” This last sentence worked out the essence of Akhbar Alsaha’s critique: The way Abaad branded the video, aestheticizing and belittling a serious problem and key feminist issue. In comparison, Akhbar Alsaha used a clear, aggressive language that reflects their anger and lack of tolerance towards changing their approach. Critiquing Abaad’s approach to feminism, one participant said:

“These campaigns to me are very problematic because it has become like a business model that brands itself to sell products like luxury brands [...] Of course art is probably one of the most important tools in activism and against oppression and everything. But the way they’ve been doing feminism with art is not really... It’s like very aesthetic and neat. And it’s like feminism for the one percent, and not really realistic. If you’re trying to reflect reality because you wanna combat or replace it with a different reality for women, the way to do it is not through aesthetics and art direction and I don’t know how much money to make a short movie or just a music video. That’s not really activism. That’s just one NGO that

probably had a surplus of money and the donor wanted them to spend the money because they gave them money to be activists. So this is my problem with Abaad.”

While I understood the critique voiced by Akhbar Alsaha and others, it made me think about the ways in which we, as feminists, voice our critique towards other feminists. The campaign’s message is still important and it was shared widely, specifically because it was well made and aesthetically appealing. So, if it reached so many people, can we really call it “feminism for the one percent”? Or is it actually a feminism that is harmless and hence, societally more acceptable to be in fact a feminism for the masses? While I think Abaad’s approach is to be criticized, I wonder whether it has to be done so harshly. Isn’t a “bad feminism”, meaning a feminism that settles for less and presents itself in a charming way, better than no feminism? Further, it leads to the question of who gets to decide whose feminism is valid and whose is not. Who gets to decide about “good” and “bad” feminism? When I asked a participant, what constituted feminism to her, she responded:

“I don't believe in one feminism. I believe in many feminisms and when I say for example, this person is racist but with women’s rights, she’s a racist feminist. But who am I to give labels, you know? Who am I to decide who gets to be a feminist and who does not? [...] I think it's just like part of like purity politics that are very controversial for me and very oppressive. Because you can start as non-intersectional and become one, you know? What does this even mean, intersectional politics, ya albe who’s that? (laughs)”

Building on this activist’s statement, feminism cannot be viewed as static but rather fluid. Fluid in a sense that it must allow mistakes to be done and to be corrected but also fluid, as being open to multiplicity. Further, these thoughts trigger questions on inner-community solidarity and support. However, the described controversy around Akl’s video is indicative of a much greater debate on “liberal” versus “radical” feminism, two labels that come up often in feminist discourses in Lebanon and beyond.

This was reflected by the participants' statements who frequently used phrases such as "the liberal feminists" or "our circles", creating a demarcation between an "us" and a "them". In subsequence, these habits of othering have consequences on the ways in which activists organize themselves, formulate demands, show solidarity and form alliances. However, the lines between "us" and "them" are often blurred and it is often not easy to understand which groups stand where.

Echoing these concerns, there are different suggestions for classifying the feminist movement. A common one is to look at the binary between NGOs and non-NGOs, focusing on the structures of funding that enable feminist actions. Interestingly, Ammar and Moughalian (2019) pointed out that the imagined binary between NGOs versus progressive groups does not accurately reflect the actual circumstances behind the work that is being done. This classification thus is limited in value as most organizations in Lebanon working on women's rights issues rely partly or completely on international funding. This is demonstrated by a study from *Lebanon Support*, according to which 29 out of 36 feminist and women's rights organizations depend on international donors for funding. In addition, only one organization reported it was self-sustainable (Mitri et al., 2016, p. 9). In this chapter, I present a characterization of the feminist movement in Beirut, focusing on the issue of NGOization as well as other aspects. In doing so, I draw on analyses from Moughalian and Ammar (2019) and Finn (2020). The NGO-ization of the movement constituted a common point of contention among the interviewees. The characterization of the feminist movement with the discussion of NGO-ization is significant to understand prevalent dynamics within the movement, both inner-community and regarding the power dynamics that arise from funder-grantee relations.

### ***3.2.1. NGOization***

With the emergence of a number of international conferences and conventions on women's rights, like CEDAW, the 1990s birthed the third wave of women's rights activism in Lebanon. Women's rights activism went through a process of "professionalization" during this time, mainly through "NGO-ization" (Mitri 2015). A number of feminist organizations, coalitions and networks emerged outside of the traditional spheres of political decision making and focused on advocacy work for legal reforms, for example to criminalize domestic violence. What I refer to as contemporary feminism began around 2005/2006 and was introduced by the politicization of and advocacy for "personal" topics like the fight against domestic and sexualized violence and structural legal discrimination against women through organizations such as the "Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women" and KAFA (Stephan 2014, p. 4). This echoes Naber and Zaatari's previously presented argument assessing the year 2006 as significant for queer feminist organizing, as a broader context was included within the queer feminist critique, taking into account the consequences of and links between Western imperialism, militarism, sectarianism, racism and the gendered dimensions thereof. This indicates a newly won awareness for these issues and a need for a feminist assessment of power dynamics that shape everyday life in Lebanon. The main discourses and topics feminists brought to public attention since then continue to be relevant today and are mostly influenced by civil rights groups and movements that demonstrate a consciousness for issues of class, foreign interference and sectarianism. More topics of importance include challenging the predominant heteronormative standards for (female) sexuality, bodily rights and sexual identity in Lebanese society, topics especially Lebanese queer organizations and groups put on the agenda (Mitri 2015, p. 9).

As NGOs are significant to civil society activism in Lebanon, they are significant in the context of this study as well. Here, I would like to mention a few organizations that are especially relevant to this thesis: *Helem*, the first LGBT+ advocacy group in the region, founded in 2002, *Meem* a collective of queer women and gender non-conforming people in the region, founded in 2007, and *Nasawiya*, a feminist activist group founded in 2009. In addition, the *Feminist Bloc*-formed in the wake of the 2015 protests, comprised of feminist groups, cooperatives, student clubs and networks (Makki, Mawla, et. al. 2018)-and *Dammeh Cooperative*- a self-sustaining feminist cooperative founded in 2014. Finally, it has to be noted that feminists in Lebanon have a newly won sense for racial injustice and hence included anti-racism as another characteristic component of the contemporary feminist politics in Lebanon. This is manifested for example in the opposition to the Kafala system. *The Anti-Racism Movement* (ARM) was launched as a grassroots collective by young feminist activists, migrant workers and domestic workers in 2010 and was later transformed into an NGO. Moreover, *Egna Legna Besidet* is a feminist, community-based collective run by Ethiopian women in Lebanon and Ethiopia working on migrant domestic workers' issues and further issues related to feminism founded in 2017. The mentioned organizations and collectives were relevant to this thesis as most activists I talked to were actively engaged in or worked for at least one of them, some were affiliated with more than one. Nevertheless, most participants harshly criticized the NGO-ization of the movement for a number of valid reasons. Commenting on the issue, one participant who worked for an international organization said:

“Generally, I think it’s [working for NGOs] the worst thing we can do, to basically form the structures that are the only legitimate spaces where women can enter, you know, as opposed to like community based organizing, not, you know, institutional based organizing, because I think NGOs in general, especially international NGOs,

very much, are a result and also benefit from capitalist, neoliberal imperialist, US frameworks. And I think, I mean, the resistance is still valid. But I also think that it's very important to enter these institutions to use tools to resist in any kind of way, [...] I mean, this, this kind of recycling of the same set of issues and the bureaucratic dissemination of information and the kind of very elite access that people have, and the kind of circulation of knowledge that is very much between the same people, like, you know, these journalists who know these researchers who talk to them, as representatives, and then, these political actors that you have access to, and you have the same conversation and kind of replication of work, because of the system of like funding.”

In this short statement, the participant summarized some of the most salient points of critique regarding the NGO-ization of the movement. The issues of elitism and the formation of exclusive circles that accumulate and claim knowledge, visibility and resources and thus, power was harshly criticized. However, most activists cannot afford not working with NGOs, which some view as a personal dilemma and others as a great privilege. Further, this access to paid labour for political work has a high threshold for access, including language skills and a formal university education amongst others.

### ***3.2.2. The Human Rights Discourse***

Adding to the list of critical aspects in the context of NGO-ization and hegemonic relationships between donors and the fund recipients in the Global South, several participants have brought up feelings of strong discomfort with “the human rights discourse”. One participant said: “I know that people do not consider feminism to be a political movement. They consider it to be something that is purely identity based. Or a human rights issue. And of course, I have a big problem with the human rights discourse because it avoids politics, and hence reality”. As activists based in Lebanon, all participants were aware of the implications Western foreign policy had on their lives. There was an awareness especially on the issue of human rights as a concept of

advocacy and foreign policy tool used by the West. Arundhati Roy captured the strong feelings of discomfort and frustration voiced by the activists:

“The idea of “human rights,” for example— sometimes it bothers me. Not in itself, but because the concept of human rights has replaced the much grander idea of justice. Human rights are fundamental rights, they are the minimum, the very least we demand. Too often, they become the goal itself. [...] but human rights aren’t enough. The goal is, and must always be, justice [...] All I’m saying is that the idea of justice—even just dreaming of justice—is revolutionary. The language of human rights tends to accept a status quo that is intrinsically unjust—and then tries to make it more accountable. But then, of course, the catch-22 is that violating human rights is integral to the project of neoliberalism and global hegemony” (Roy and Cusack 2016, p. 55-57).

Considering human rights as the bare minimum, Roy critiqued the lack of a vision for justice. At the same time she recognized the inherent flawed nature of our system that cannot sustain itself without creating human rights violations. This critique is reflected by another interlocutor who expanded on these ideas from a transnational feminist lens:

“And being a transnational feminist means that when we think of justice, we cannot think of justice within the citizenship limitations, or within even like the Human Rights Framework, because human rights are citizen rights. They’re not rights for the stateless. They’re not rights for like other people as well that might lack documentation, etc. So thinking, like to, to access a form of justice that encompasses everybody we would have to do it from an anti border perspective, especially in our context, like filled with colonialism and imposed borders. It would have to be like part of the process of how we fight.”

Evidently, the critique of the NGO-ization of the movement springs from a feminist perspective that is conscious of issues around class justice and Western involvement in local politics that is based on a understanding of (feminist) activism as a struggle for justice. Further, this perspective included race, nationality, and class, in addition to gender, as categories of analysis. This vision for justice clearly gets distorted once funding plays a role as the funders usually follow agendas that mostly do not match the activists’ vision (i.e. the mainstreaming or watering down of radical

movements and ideas implied in the process of NGO-ization of civil society movements).

As an example for the “mainstreaming” of radical movements, ideas or concepts, the development and appropriation around the concept of intersectionality is applicable here. While it is rooted in the radical liberatory theories of Black feminism, intersectionality today has become a category to be found in reports of INGOs, and thus has become a widely used idea. In this context, scholar Myra Marx Ferree notes “the idea of intersectionality as a movement of resistance to the mainstream erasure of inequalities has been converted into the idea of ‘diversity’ understood as a positive, albeit neoliberal, approach to social inclusion” (Ferree, 2013). “Diversity” today is a widely used term and has dominantly arrived in the corporate world. Be it institutions, companies or political groups, the call for more diversity is ubiquitous, yet serves at most for a tokenist employment of minority groups with no real agenda for change, let alone justice. As it is used by funders to enhance their image and stage themselves as “inclusive”, it ultimately leads to an appropriation and distortion of activists’ and movements’ agendas. While the mainstreaming of concepts might at times be constructive to spread an important idea to larger audiences, the appropriation of these ideas for the wrong reasons must be taken into account.

### ***3.2.3. NGO-ization as a condition of possibility***

Nevertheless, activist groups, organizations and actors are dependent on funding.

Addressing especially the power dynamics between the funders and grantees, one participant said:

“And one of the reasons that keeps it [feminism] an elitist endeavor is the NGO-ization of the movement. So for example we would have a cause and the only way we get to work on it so that we get to provide services to people would be through

applying for funding. And then we either get the funding with its conditions or we just don't get the funding and the whole project just stops... So in the end we either don't get to work on this specific issue or we don't get to work on it the way we want to because of the funding's conditions.”

The dilemma described here targets especially the conditions linked to funding as well as the dependency of activist endeavours to funding. This hints at both, the existing or lack of infrastructure of activist work. Feminist activists Roula Seghaier and Safa Hamzeh reiterated the issue and argued for smaller feminist NGOs focusing on issues of gender struggle to make themselves sustainable. Their solution was to only accept funding from feminist donors who “look like us, talk like us, and have a similar political framework. This makes negotiation and addressing discomfort possible” (Seghaier and Hamzeh 2020). While this is not a solution to the problem of NGO-ization, it is a start to selectively rely on donors who understand the dynamics at work. Commenting on the issue of NGO-ization from a global perspective, another participant who used to be part of global feminist networks made possible through big INGOs said:

“The other day I was talking to a friend from Brazil we were saying how I don't think we've ever met without the white person in the room. You know, because they are the ones who have all the money to kind of introduce with each other. And we don't really have like South-South opportunities because you need someone to pay it. And we don't do enough in the Arab region at all.”

While the global exchange of feminist activists is valuable especially to get the opportunity to learn from each other and exchange strategies, it is mostly organized through the international organizations from the West. Unfortunately this rarely happens through a distinct South-South initiative, a fact several participants have mentioned and lamented. Consequently, South-South conversations are needed to talk precisely about dilemmas like this one as the pressing issues in different places are often similar due to

the fact that the same structures of power are at play. Having these kind of conversation could help finding local solutions to global issues. Further, they might weaken the existing hegemonic ties by shifting the main conversations from Western-centric towards South-South.

NGO-ization does not only impact the feminist movement in Beirut but is rather a global phenomenon within civil society movements. Talking about the Indian context, Arundhati Roy warned of the consequences of NGO-ization and the power dynamics behind the funding that subtly determine activists' trajectories, turning "potential radicals into receivers". She especially emphasized the dangers of "pitting the funded against the unfunded" which ultimately centers the funder instead of the grantees (Roy and Cusack 2016, p. 52). Here, we can jump back to the controversy around Rémie Akl's video that did precisely that: pitting the funded, meaning Akl against the unfunded, meaning the "radical feminists" and ultimately centered the funder, Abaad and its international standing and legitimation instead of Akl's critique of violence against women. Finally, this example illustrates clearly the ways in which these global debates, hierarchies and power dynamics are manifested locally and how they cause harm and damage in ways that are not always obvious at first sight. The question then arises, must we demonize the structures that enable feminist activism?

As Finn (2020) argued, many of these critiques have a blind spot towards key considerations in the context of feminist activism in Beirut, leaving out the "productivity of NGO-ization" regarding network and coalition building (Finn 2020, p. 60). She pointed out that NGOs provide paid labor for a number of activists in spaces within a field that is especially precarious regarding job opportunities. As almost all participants I talked to in the framework of this study harshly criticized the NGO-ization

of the feminist movement, several participants work for NGOs, and hence benefit from the structures themselves. Having a perspective from within, some did see positive aspects about the current prevalent structures. Here, participants mentioned having the liberty, time and space to focus on the issues they are passionate about as well as the financial security they enjoy through employment, especially in times of economic crisis. This is significant especially in the context of the current financial crisis happening in Lebanon during which most employees of NGOs continue to be paid in US Dollars. A circumstance that drastically transforms the position of these people both, financially and in a socio-economic sense. One said:

“To put it in simple words: the advantage is clearly that you are organized and focused on the specific issues you work on and in the end of course you have a financial security. You’re not a volunteer, you’re offering your time and at the same time securing your livelihood. Not everyone has the ability to volunteer.. if you have a job to secure your livelihood, your time is limited and you don’t have the luxury to volunteer. For example my sister who is a school teacher will never be able to follow up on legislative processes.”

Practical accounts like this one helped put the debate into perspective, respecting the need for activists to survive. Further, as precarity is oftentimes normalized in activist scenes, it is important to stress the scarcity of time as a resource in a capitalist system that requires people to spend the majority of their lives working for survival. In this context, people who also had the responsibility of parenting were even more effected by this circumstance which is why activist groups oftentimes consisted majoritarially of younger people and students. Consequently, when activism becomes a luxury, movements become elitist and out of touch with the people they aim to fight for. Acknowledging the importance of the outlined critique of NGO-ization, Zeina Ammar and Catherine Moughalian offered a classification of feminist activism away from the

focus on the binary of NGO versus non-NGO. With a distinct focus on movement building, the authors suggested the following instead:

“We posit that it is a group’s ideology, reflected in their understanding and analysis of the problem and their end goal, and not their legal status or organizational structure, that better determines their role in the feminist movement. A more useful typology [...] is one that analyses feminist action based on tangible political differences, namely their proximity to or level of engagement with the state, their relationship to their constituencies, and their understanding and analysis of feminist issues” (Moughalian & Ammar, 2019, p. 14).

I considered the authors’ suggestion to be both more productive and useful in regard to analyses concerning the feminist movement, as it is in reality oftentimes used by activists themselves. When I talked to an activist who works for the Anti-Racism-Movement (ARM) for example, a formalized NGO that accepts funding, the participant considered herself and ARM to be radical actors due to their specified focus on the fight against Kafala. Further, I considered Ammar and Moughalian’s approach to be a more constructive and hopeful one as it acknowledges the important work of so many that oftentimes receive harsh criticism merely based on their legal status. In a context like the activist one that is marked by frustration and precarity especially due to the absence of functional state structures that either sit out or outsource structural problems present in the country, constructive outlooks are direly needed.

#### ***3.2.4. DammeH Cooperative- an alternative to the NGOization of feminist activism?***

As a result of the described developments and by virtue of learning from past experiences, many activists were wary of where to invest their energies. This is why many look for alternative structures and ways of organizing, such as grassroots movement building or cooperatives. One such example is *DammeH Cooperative*. DammeH was founded in 2014 and is a self-sustaining cooperative for women, trans and

gender non-conforming people in Beirut with its own space. This space worked as a space of assembly not only for Dammeh and its members but also for other groups. This is how they created a small network of related initiatives and groups that work in similar ways and housed exchanges linking issues related to gender justice, economic, class justice and racial justice, creating a space for intersectional debates. According to information provided to me by a member of Dammeh, the space is currently used by Eгна Legna. Dammeh attempts and proposes to think social, economic, environmental and gender justice together and aims to create sustainable structures of organizing independently from funding (Dammeh Cooperative, 2019). As part of the Feminist Bloc, they organized and collaborated with other feminist groups. In their manifesto, the members of Dammeh write:

“For us, it is evident that feminism contains this aspiration for a just economy that respects nature, ecosystems, workers, bodies, labor, genders, and that can bring forth transformative propositions for alternative models of valuing labor and (re)production, as we’ve seen in feminists’ defense of paid housework or the recognition of sex workers as workers.” (ibid.)

With their alternative model, Dammeh sets an example for other groups that aim to free themselves from the hierarchies and vicious cycles of donor-funder relationships. While it surely is not flawless, the cooperative model allows to realize the idea of an alternative, more sustainable and democratic way of political organizing that values individuals. However, given the contemporary capitalist circumstances we exist in, it is difficult for cooperatives to survive long-term since they are oftentimes not competitive with other models based on classic ways of funding and sustenance. Unfortunately Dammeh is currently defunct. With an intersectional approach of thinking a variety of political issues and responsibilities together, Dammeh translated their political values

into propositions of concrete practice, paving the way to a future that is liveable not only for some but for all. As collectives are based on a strong sense of community-oriented organizing, in the following I briefly cover the aspect of community as an important aspect of feminist organizing and activism.

### **3.3. Shared Suffering, Shared Joy: The Importance of Community**

Within the interviews, the aspect of community and community-based organizing in the context of feminist activism was frequently talked about. Here, participants mentioned the importance of radical friendship, non-romantic intimacy and growing together as important to them. In relation to these aspects, several participants talked about kindness, softness and acceptance of oneself and the other as political values they were establishing for themselves and the groups they organized with. Community was related to as support group and a group in which a collective understanding is established, a space in which the constant need to explain oneself does not exist. This aspect was especially important for participants who do not live their lives according to the mainstream societal standards and expectations prevalent in Lebanon, be it because they lived alone as young women, they chose not to get married, they identified as lesbian or queer, or any other reason.

In this context, *Meem* provides an interesting example. *Meem* is a radical collective of queer women that was founded around the year 2007 out of a womens' and trans group that separated itself from *Helem*. *Meem* is significant as it had hundreds of members and even succeeded in publishing an online magazine called *Bekhsoos* and a book called *Bareed Mista.3jil*. Further, they had a space to meet, a café and a therapy room in which they offered therapy for their members. These spaces all demonstrate a focus on community-oriented activism that takes the wellbeing of their members

seriously. Further, as these spaces specifically for queer folk rarely existed at that time in Lebanon, providing them to create a community was part of Meem's mission. The offer of therapy is also significant here as it indicates an awareness of the importance mental health during a time this topic was rarely talked about and yet direly needed. To add, these spaces were an answer to a desire for community, meeting each other and exchange with like-minded people. In a longer article on their trajectories, practices and strategies, one of the founders of Meem explained that they succeeded to build the collective around the years of 2005, ironically at a time of constant political crises and conflict during which nobody really paid close attention to queer women organizing.

She wrote:

“In the eyes of political and religious leaders, women are not really threatening; they are not capable of producing real change or of jeopardizing patriarchal authority, especially in a case such as ours where we are not tackling politics directly. Parallel to the country's distraction from the queer movement came the rise of the Internet, which became our most powerful organizing and awareness tool” (Nadine M., 2010, p. 11).

Older queer participants mentioned the importance of the internet as a tool to organize, write and learn about issues related to gender and sexuality during the interviews. This point is highlighted in the next chapter in more detail. As I learned from the interviews and the literature on Meem, the idea behind it was first, to build a community and a safe house for especially queer women and trans people and to then build a feminist political movement through *Nasawiya*, a political organization that was founded shortly after. The community aspect behind Meem was of high importance as it was founded during a time in which the general situation of queer people in Lebanon was vulnerable regarding the financial stability and physical security of queer people, with very little awareness and campaigning on the issue. These aspects made the need

for a community even more dire and led the inner-community bonds to become very close and important to people. Accordingly, in their study on queer activism in the context of the 2006 July war, Naber and Zaatari (2014) found that their participants involved in LGBTQ+ rights activism had a wide definition of family beyond biological and blood relations, referring to their social and political contexts as family. One of their interlocutors said:

“I think Meem is very much a family in the positive and the negative sense. It’s empowering that we’re there for each other, and we have family relationships, sort of. Like fatherly relationships and motherly relationships and sibling relationships and sibling jealousy and sibling competition and fatherly protection and motherly anxiety. We have all of these things traditional family relationships within the community that we have built. And I think that’s a good thing. Because they’re not there by themselves, we’re challenging them all the time” (Naber and Zaatari 2014, p. 99).

As many queer people have broken, bad or no relationships with their families, these alternative family relationships are essential and common. I had the chance to talk to several activists who used to organize with Meem and Nasawiya and learnt about many of their strategies, how they built their groups from nothing and the hundreds of members they used to have. Unfortunately, both Meem and Nasawiya have been inactive for years now. As an explanation, activists told me it was mainly due to internal political differences which could not be overcome. One explanation came from a conversation of former members published in the feminist journal *Kohl* in which they reflected on their time with Meem and Nasawiya:

“The movements that came before Meem were women’s rights movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We lived in an illusion that we are different from NGOs. We saw our work as politicized, as inclusive, and we believed in changing the world. We sometimes felt that there were some problems, but we all believed that change is happening and that we are leading the movement. We succeeded at creating an effective noise sometimes, in Lebanon and even in the region, and we were also known in some international mediums, but we were not working by the values we pretended to have, such as being a place relying on self-funding. I think we wanted to have our own ways

and style of life, but the reality was not so. We were working within a certain hierarchy, even if it was invisible, and we were getting funding” (Sanaa H. 2015, p. 97).

These honest discussions and reflections are pivotal to understand, learn and grow from past activist projects and endeavours. By way of building a community, a political organization and spaces exclusively consisting of women, trans and queer people organizing around feminist issues Meem and Nasawiya have built a legacy that is unmatched in Lebanon as it has not been done before or after. As movements are dynamic in nature, change is constant and their practices, learnings and experiences have built a sustainable ground for the contemporary feminist movement as we know it today. Out of their old structures of organizing, new groups such as Dammeh or the Feminist Bloc have been formed and have advanced the feminist agenda today. Further, participants who are former members of Meem told me they have heard several of their chants on the streets of Beirut during the uprising of October 17, 2019. Hearing the chants they have created years earlier on the streets chanted again by a new generation of young feminist activists who were as determined as the ones before touched them deeply. This is how their legacy is found in many aspects of the movement today. Accordingly, it marked the ways in which feminists organize themselves today. Asking about the dynamics when organizing with friends, one participant told me:

“On the one hand of course sometimes personal relationships are going to get in the way of organizing because they exist and you have feelings and you cannot separate your feelings from any space specially when you all exist in the space. At the same time I don’t know if I think that’s a bad thing. I think maybe we should just rethink organizing in a way that fits friendship better rather than try to... make friendship more rigid so that organizing can continue. I’d much rather organize with friends. I don’t want to separate these spaces up at all. I wanna organize for the people I love and with the people I love and in that sense I don’t really care about the movement as much as I care about these people. You know?”

This statement reflects Meem's vision of building a political movement based on community-oriented organizing. The values this participant brought forward as conditional to her organizing were the foundation on which Meem and Nasawiya built their groups. However, looking at activism solely as an activity to do with friends or people who share the same habits and values bears great risks of losing sight of people outside one's own circles. Powerful and sustainable movement building has to include people that might not look or talk the same way but who share a similar vision of what should be. If a movement fails to account for the inclusion of a multitude of opinions and people, it is most likely set up for failure.

### **3.4. Feminism for whom? Critiques and Points of Contention within the Feminist Movement**

The activists I spoke to were engaged in a variety of groups whose infrastructure was characterized by different organizational forms. Asking participants about their activism, difficulties, critique and discomfort with the way things work within their own groups and the movement came up quickly. From the protests during the uprising as well as when I got to know the feminist movement through attending meetings of different groups and getting to know activists, I perceived the general atmosphere at times as exclusionary and loaded with tensions. These factors withheld the risk of an overall atmosphere that may hinder people who were new or younger from participating. These observations corresponded with participants' views on the matter. It is important to note that I had difficulties writing this section as I do not see myself in the position to harshly criticize activists for how they tackled issues. Further, much has been written and said about the issues of toxicity and internalized practices of harm and exclusion within feminist activist communities. I hence had no intention in causing any

more pain or harm by writing about the shortcomings of activists. However, since critiques have taken up much space within the conversations, I will briefly highlight the main points with the intention to raise awareness for the mentioned issues, hoping for a future of organizing in which harm is reduced by the creation of spaces that are more inclusive. In this section, I intentionally used more direct quotes from the interviews to demonstrate how points of critique and contention by various participants stood in conversation with each other and to not overly interpret what has been said. Strikingly, a common theme of critique voiced by almost all participants was the perceived exclusivity, inaccessibility and fragmentation of the groups especially based on elitism regarding for example the language people use and a focus of activities in Beirut, which corresponded with the aforementioned critique of NGO-ization of the movement.

#### ***3.4.1. Clique-ish and exclusionary***

Many described feminist circles as “clique-ish”, exclusive and hardly accessible. In a conversation on feminist movement building, activists from Meem and Nasawiya reflected on their past years. This conversation took place before the two groups decided to discontinue their work. In the context of the common critique of exclusivity that existed even at the time of the conversation in 2015, one activist said:

“The formation of cliques was not necessarily the result of a certain power hierarchy. Sometimes, it was an organic product. I feel that I am part of a movement with you, and with others surrounding me. For example, I feel safe to know that many of you live around my home or in my neighbourhood. We exchange support and services, and we now think of planting our own vegetables. This is the community that I want to be part of, and I feel that these little actions allow us to fight the capitalist system, and that is where intersectionality starts for me. It might seem selfish because it is on a small scale, but that is the community I aim for. I do not want more than that” (Sanaa H., 2015, p. 98).

However, this point of view was not shared by most activists I talked to. One participant expanded this critique to add the component of classism regarding the access to a specific way of life based on consumption:

“I think, now in Beirut, these groups are only accessible to a specific part of society. And based on class primarily, but also based on consumption, meaning neoliberal consumption. So for example, if you go to Badaro, if you go to Gemmayze, all these spaces, you have that you will find that [feminist] discourse very easily, and you will find, you know, an invitation very easily. And that's very much based on like, a neoliberal assumption and a rejection of sectarianism that you can afford, because you can consume these neoliberal spaces.”

Here, sect and sectarianism was looked at through a class lens by which this participant argued that the factor class has to be viewed in relation to the ability of crossing sectarian lines and rejecting sectarian belonging. She further situated this argument within the feminist scene in Beirut that mostly consists of people who can be found in specific spaces in the city. The main critique here is the lack of cross-class touch points which is manifested through the lack of meeting spaces with a low threshold with regard to consumption. Another important aspect when talking about class and classism in Lebanon, is a classed understanding of sect and conservatism. One participant who wears the hijab noted that she did not feel welcome in certain feminist groups and environments. Further, several interlocutors reported cases of exclusion, for example based on racism within the groups:

“I can pick up a lot of instances where a Syrian feminist or activists were denied platform because they're not Lebanese and Lebanese feminists wanted to appeal to public opinion to play around respectability politics and say: No, no, let's not start talking about racism yet. Just understanding things purely as identity politics.”

As briefly explained before, racism is institutionalized in Lebanon which is manifested through the inhumane system of Kafala or strong anti-Syrian and Palestinian

sentiments, which affects especially migrant and refugee women. As this is an ongoing issue with fatal consequences, feminists in Lebanon have gained awareness on the issue. This however does not automatically imply strictly anti-racist attitudes within feminist activist circles. In addition, several participants mentioned transphobia as a problem even within circles that claim to be safe spaces for the trans community. One person critiqued especially the way in which trans people are an object of discussion or tokenized, embedding her critique in a general critique of the conception of gender justice:

“I don’t think we’ve really understood how to tackle gender and how to think about cis and non-binary and how to really speak about these issues in a way that is not tokenizing. There’s a long way to go in terms of gender justice even within the feminist movement. I don’t know whether we have a real consensus when it comes to trans rights. In our official discourse we are of course trans-inclusive but there are practices that show you the discrimination, that show you the tokenizing, or that show you that there is still a whole bunch of cis-privilege. Trans men for example are fetishized a lot or like trans-masculine people and androgynous people are fetishized a lot and harassed a lot.”

This statement indicates an access to the issue of trans-inclusionary feminism through Western debates by the way she expressed her concern. Further, her frustration with the debates within the feminist community shone through. In my view, these critiques are highly valuable to create more inclusive spaces of organizing but also to enhance the feminist agenda. These aspects trigger the question of whether spaces free of discrimination can even exist since we all grew up in systems that are based on structures of oppression, which is why nobody can be free of the learnt biases. Acknowledging this fact, feminists developed tools that aim to reduce the harm and enable us to learn from each other. Several participants did reflect about their own problematic and harmful habits, mentioning how they went through processes of unlearning these habits. In light of this discussion, activists have mentioned “call-in“

versus “call-out culture”, the practice of calling someone in to teach a well-meaning person in a private environment, versus the practice of calling people out often in a public manner, as well as actively making efforts to learn and unlearn as strategies to overcome their own, internalized biases and problematic behavioural patterns.

### ***3.4.2. Beirut as Center of Action***

Another common theme of critique was the focus of activities in the capital Beirut, which was usually named in the context of inaccessibility and exclusivity of activist spaces. Evidently, it has not always been like that. One older, lesbian participant who used to be engaged with Meem reflected on the way contemporary feminist organizing is focused in the capital and argued that queer feminist organizing with Meem used to be more decentralized and included a diverse range of actively engaged people. Unfortunately due to the lack of resources on Meem I was not able to find out more information on the infrastructure of activism Meem used to have or the number of members and their localities. However, the hunch I gained from my research is that feminist and especially queer feminist organizing in Lebanon always used to be rather centered around the capital. The participant then moved on by critiquing some habits around the infrastructure of organizing:

“What we do with someone who grew up in some rural area or a village and then came to Beirut, to let’s say go to university here [...]... what we currently do is take these people out of their home regions and we’re like ‘come here, it’s safe’. And this was important for a long time for many of us because our families weren’t safe, our neighbourhoods weren’t safe. Okay. But the question now is as we are strong enough in numbers and organizing to maybe say, in internal discussions, that we encourage person X who comes from a specific place to maintain relationships with their region because that’s important because she can talk to women there. I won’t be able to talk to them. So, this person who is part of us, she has a home here but she doesn’t have to like... forget how to talk to her neighbours about their issues or she doesn’t have to feel so important that she won’t even invite the neighbours for example.”

While this statement highlighted a common issue of especially queer, young people moving away from their villages to find safe spaces to express themselves and to find like-minded individuals who lead similar lives and share similar politics, this issue has to be viewed in a broader context of class. While of course the personal safety of people has to be taken into account due to the lack of anonymity in Lebanon where kinship, sect and class are pivotal factors in almost all aspects of life, this logic indicates a simple binary, using the image of the backwarded rural areas versus progressive urban lifestyle. The consequence is a homogenous movement that consisted of like-minded individuals who reproduce and sustain each other. Another participant reflected on this issue in a broader context, linking the exclusivity of the movement and focus on Beirut with the ways in which the feminist analysis and critique is being formulated and developed.

“All this talk, that we should be ‘less radical’ in our demands with the argument that we want to attract the aunties and grandmas in the villages as if by default they wouldn’t relate to the demands. [...] All of this comes from like classist assumptions and from the assumptions that this woman is not able to bond with you over something that like she sees to be true. [...] I give workshops and I am part of workshops [...] And I find sometimes that these aunties and grandmas are able to connect on a deeper level than like somebody who’s acquainted to feminism through like mainstream commercial, capitalist channels. For example when you say something like, ‘Men are trash’, okay, imagine? She would be like, Oh, are you a radical feminist? Why don’t you organize with men? Because like her type of organizing, is like through Joumana Haddad or whatever that is. But when I say like ‘All men are trash’ to the grandma or auntie she’s like: ‘Yes, they’re trash enno yel3an abouhon.’ And for me, like that creates a lot of opportunity for us to organize together. So we just need some humility and not to project our own biases on them.”

This statement challenged class as well as generational and regional biases and triggered the question of who can organize with whom based on what foundation. Further, this participant argues that the answer to the existing debates in the feminist community around inclusivity cannot be to water down the core values but rather

finding different ways of communication with larger crowds outside the usual circles. All mentioned statements essentially critiqued how a lack of class consciousness and a focus on habitus in a bourdieusian sense led to biases and limitations in formulating a feminist analysis and critique. Here, I would like to specifically bring attention to the topic of language and language sensibility. Often the use of a certain language is deemed highly important in these circles. Nevertheless, many participants suggested in their statements that there is a dire need to move away from these stiff ideas of what feminist activism and organizing should look like. People who have never heard the term can still practice a feminist consciousness in their every day lives. As bell hooks suggests “the possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being” (hooks 1991, p. 3). Hence I suggest putting the spotlight on what feminism can offer, the different variations on what solidarity can look like and how to be the agents of change for the collective.

### ***3.4.3. Lack of Direction***

There was a common discomfort voiced by participants with a general feeling of being lost and having no direction. Participants told me they did not know where the feminist movement is going, and what comes next. Especially older participants who have been part of the movement for a long time struggled with answering these questions. Several participants have lamented a lack of a collective vision for the movement. Further, a lack of solidarity between actors who work on feminist issues was mentioned. In light of the catastrophic economic and political situation in 2020 and shortly after the Beirut blast, I sensed general feelings of being overwhelmed, shocked, drained and devastated. As I am looking at the contemporary state of the feminist movement within this specific moment in time, it would be negligent not to take these

aspects into account. As most participants clearly mirrored these feelings, several also saw the possibility of a pivotal moment of transformation in that regard.

### **3.5. Conclusion: Moving towards Feminist Practice**

In this chapter, I presented a characterization of the feminist movement in Beirut, focusing on the structures of organizing, common points of contention, issues of funding and community-oriented organizing. I opened with a discussion of radical versus liberal feminism that hints at larger debates within the feminist activist community around issues of solidarity, community and alliances. As most activists used a clear language of differentiation with regard to trends within the movement they did not identify with, I argued that these habits of othering have consequences on the ways in which activists organize themselves, formulate demands, show solidarity and form alliances. Further, as a pressing issue and common point of contention among interviewees, I shed light on the NGOization of the movement. Here, I argued that this debate is significant to understand prevalent dynamics within the movement, both inner-community and regarding the power dynamics that arise from funder-grantee relations. As the vast majority of feminist and women's rights organizations in Lebanon depend on international donors and funding, I contended that the often used classification that builds on an imagined binary between funded and unfunded is limited in value. To add, I pointed out the dilemma most activists found themselves in, that is the consciousness for issues of elitism, formation of exclusive circles, while most activists cannot afford not working with NGOs. I further found community to be a key aspect of contemporary feminist activism in Beirut for various reasons. Drawing from the experiences of feminist organizations Meem and Nasawiya, I argued that their way of building a community, a political organization and spaces exclusively consisting of women, trans

and queer people to organize around feminist issues, Meem and Nasawiya have built a legacy that is unmatched in Lebanon.

Sara Ahmed defines a movement as the power that transforms what is. This power roots first within the personal lived realities and experiences of the individuals it consists of. But eventually, she writes “Feminism: the dynamism of making connections” (Ahmed 2017, p. 15). Through her writing, and that of many other feminist writers, activists, artists and poets I refer to throughout this thesis, I have learnt that feminism is so much more than an ideology. It is a way of going through life and feminist movements are the shelter in which we find ourselves and each other. In addition to that, feminist writing, poetry, movies, series, art and other forms of expression are essential in that regard as they carry us through it all by giving us the tools of how to be heard, to be empowered and to empower. But most importantly; to dream and to believe in the possibility of a better tomorrow. Sara Ahmed taught me that these resources are my feminist survival kit.

One resource in my survival kit is the series “Betty” tells the story of an all-girls skate group in modern-day New York City. The young women started their own group after facing a lot of backlash from the traditionally male-dominated sub-culture of skating. The series told their story, how they navigated the skate world and the city, empowering each other and other women, not only to skate but to stand their ground. Kirt, one of the main characters was depicted as a person who does not shy away from confrontation with men. In the last episode, when another character started a fight with a man because he wouldn't let his daughter skate, she was the one to calm the situation down. When her friend asked why she didn't fight as usual, Kirt responds: “I want to stop fighting the patriarchy and just start helping the matriarchy instead”. With this

statement, Kirt shifted her focus away from fighting what she considered to be wrong. She understood that if she kept fighting the dominant power, she might never get to the point of building something herself and hence flipped around who owns the power over the narrative by focusing her energies on things that matter to her.

Asking the participants about obstacles within their activism, I could feel the prevalence of a general sense of being lost. As briefly described, several participants voiced that there was a lack of direction within their activism. One said:

“Everything we do is in resistance of white feminism all the time, or white LGBT kinds of politics and I regret that very much. I wish we could have done it as part of liberation movements. I’m not saying of course, there haven’t been feminists everywhere who have been like, you know, Marxist feminist or socialist feminist or who have fought on so many different issues from a class lens and so on, but I think the hegemony, the dominance is very present.. especially now with social media, there is very much a certain type of feminism that’s very performative [..] And I don’t know what we could have done differently.. it’s a bit like with queer identity. I’m sad because we didn’t have the chance to figure out this queerness ourselves. Instead, we were so desperate and so persecuted that you know... and you can ask any queer movement in the world... they’re gonna tell you that when the internet came around, we found resources mostly in English.”

While Kirt and the activists I interviewed come from very different contexts, I think their critiques come from a similar place. The main question at hand is: What is our position and what do we want our position to be? Is it enough to build an agenda on critique, differentiating ourselves from the dominant other, be it the patriarchy, imperialism, racism, and other feminists, or should we rather focus on ourselves? Instead of focusing on what is wrong with our systems, maybe we should start asking ourselves: What do we actually want? In my eyes, shifting the focus and not letting the dominant powers restrain one’s vision is truly revolutionary. By not limiting ourselves to the bounds imposed on us through oppression, we delegitimize these bounds and

fight them in a more direct, proactive way. With these notions, I now move to the next chapter, which revolves around the demands feminist activists bring to the table.

## CHAPTER 4

### FEMINISM IS A LONGING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: ON PERFORMING FEMINIST ACTIVISM

*“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*

- Lilla Watson (Leonen, 2004)

*“You know I work for the liberation of people because when I liberate myself, I'm liberating other people ... her [the white woman's] freedom is shackled in chains to mine and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free.”*

- Fanny Lou Hamer (1971) in Deborah  
King (1988)

#### **4.1. Introduction**

Derived from my analysis and findings in the previous chapters, my main argument is that feminism essentially is a longing for justice as well as it is identity making and provides a sense of self for activists and many others who identify as feminists. This longing for justice is propelled by personal and in many cases, painful experiences and externalized through activism and organizing which happens in various ways under the umbrella that forms the feminist movement. This chapter's aim is twofold. First, I aim to investigate activists' understanding of justice by asking *How do activists conceptualize their feminism?* Here, I outline the main issues of organizing and the reasoning behind them. I argue that these issues are in many cases derived from the activists' personal motivations and their understanding of justice. Understanding activists' way of thinking of justice and more importantly, the strands of thought behind it, forms a crucial element of this thesis, as I see a link between the issues of organizing

and performativity. Consequently, the way activists conceptualize feminism is indicative of how they perform feminism.

Second, following this analysis, in the remaining part of this chapter, I examine the ways in which activists perform their activism. I do so along the lines of the question, *What are the ways in which feminist activists perform their activism?* In the literature review of this thesis, I outlined four strategies historically used by black feminist activists in the context of their struggle for liberation. First, the political use of lived experiences, second, strategic solidarity, third, building alliances and finally, strategic visibility. Based on my interviews, I argue that these strategies are key strategies of feminist activists in Beirut. In the previous chapter, I examined the first strategy by showing how personal experiences shape activists' coming to feminism. In this chapter, I argue that alliances, solidarity and strategic visibility constitute the main aspects of performed feminist activism. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I decided to focus on alliance-building and (in)visibility.

#### **4.2. Conceptualizing Justice**

*[Feminism], It's... it's moving against individualizing the problem and looking into all the shit, and levels of shit that happen because of all the different layers that are underneath this issue that lead to those individual "problems". Once we look at it this way, the problem itself becomes very political, the problem becomes way bigger than Nina Abdel Malak publicly said whatever, you know?*

- Participant

Based on the findings of the previous chapter, I have demonstrated that feminism essentially means a longing for justice as well as it provides a sense of self. The above quote from one participant eloquently summarizes this finding, illustrating that feminism essentially means seeing the structural in what is conveyed to be personal. Following this logic, feminist activism is a translation of this longing into

concrete action. In this section, I outline the main issues of organizing. I contend that these issues are in many cases derived from activists' personal motivations. To contextualize my observations and findings, Deema Kaedbey's work on queer feminism in Beirut is once again helpful. She states that queer feminism is grounded in a variety of movements and campaigns in which women have participated. This includes organizing on "traditional topics" of the women's movement such as domestic violence and women's right to pass their citizenship to their children as well as the participation in the anti-racist fight against the Kafala system and for LGBTQ+ rights (Kaedbey, 2014a, p. 13). I identify three main issues that build the foundation of feminist activism and organizing in Lebanon; gender justice, economic justice and racial justice. I understand these three issues as general categories under which many other topics can be placed. This classification is a result of the coding process and based on how often the topics were named by the participants. In the category gender justice, I identified the topics gender based violence, harassment, respectability politics, reproductive justice, bodily autonomy, agency, sexual freedom, queer justice & queer liberation, marriage, the family, motherhood, the figure of the father, masculinity, sectarianism and kinship. In the category economic justice, I identified the topics access to the economy, feminized labour, exploitation, class and anti-capitalism. Finally, in the category racial justice, I identified the topics the fight against Kafala, racism, citizenship, refugees, migration and feminized labour.

Drawing on Kaedbey's work, I see that today's emphasis on working on the intersections of a variety of topics is the result of a newly won sense for injustice many have to face in Lebanon that feminists have gained over the past years. This newly won sense for injustices like racism is based on the understanding of structures of oppression

as interconnected to collective liberation. Based on my observations, I contend that Lebanese contemporary feminism is characterized by a sense of intersectionality. Ammar and Moughalian translate this perception into words by emphasizing the “emergence of a feminist discourse, since the 2000s, which is defined as adopting a broader and more systemic approach than that of women’s rights, tackling issues like heterosexism and racism, and adopting an intersectional discourse on the liberation of women” (Ammar and Moughalian 2019, p. 13). Following feminist activists’ conception of justice presented in this chapter, I argue that intersectionality as an idea is central in the discourse on and understanding of justice feminist activists present. Moving from discourse to action, in the following section I examine the translation of feminist discourse into activist strategy.

### **4.3. Performing Feminist Activism**

Building on feminist activists’ conception of justice, in this section I examine the ways in which activists perform their activism. Derived from the literature on Black feminist activism, I outlined four strategies historically used by feminist activists in the literature review of this thesis. First, the political use of lived experiences, second, strategic solidarity, third, building alliances and finally, strategic visibility. Based on my fieldwork, I argue that these strategies are key strategies of feminist activists in Beirut. In the previous chapter, I examined the first strategy by showing how personal experiences shape activists’ coming to feminism. In this chapter, I argue that alliances, solidarity and strategic visibility constitute the main aspects of performed feminist activism. Due to the limited scope of a master’s thesis, I set my focus on the two strategies (in)visibility and alliances. As solidarity is a big topic itself, I cannot do it

justice here. It is however discussed at length in Allison Finn’s analysis of feminist activism against gendered violence (Finn, 2020).

#### ***4.3.1. Stronger Together? The Strategic Use of Alliances***

I identified the formation and use of alliances as one of the main strategies of feminist activism in Beirut. This follows the predominant engagement of feminist activists I interviewed with groups that commit to politics based on solidarity and alliances. Zeina Ammar and Catherine Moughalian echoed this finding by identifying “intersectionality, solidarity and coalition building“ as one of the most important trends that shape current feminist movement building in Lebanon (Ammar and Moughalian 2019, p. 6). According to the authors, radical feminist actors and groups have pushed for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist activism and a broader discursive framework rather than tackling feminist single-struggle issues. They add, though critiqued, “radical groups like Nasawiya have formed issue-based alliances with reformist organizations such as Kafa”(ibid., p. 16). The alliance between Nasawiya and Kafa has been mentioned frequently by the participants as an important milestones in their own activism. Many mentioned in specific the importance of the campaigns against domestic violence that extended for years. One participant who used to work for Kafa recalled:

“We were already working on campaigns against domestic violence for around seven years and back then we felt like there were many cases of femicide, there was really some sort of momentum at some point and there was this accumulation of awareness that we were creating through years of working on the issue [...] then there was the first real protest after many years on March 8, 2014 [International Women’s Day]<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> International Women’s Day (IWD) is an international holiday celebrated annually worldwide to commemorate and protest for achievements towards gender equity (United Nations, n.d.). It

that we organized on the issue of domestic violence and at that point people were aware and angry because they couldn't believe this was actually happening in Lebanon and felt that this circumstance had to change. So back then really many people showed up and the year after we did the same and again many people came. Then in the years after, there was the You Stink movement... And 2016/17, we went back to striking to follow up on the issue of the lawsuits of the killed women.”

The campaigning around the issue of domestic violence was frequently mentioned as it constituted first, a focal topic of Kafa, second, a visible element of feminist organizing in the public and third, took place around a public debate on a law to criminalize domestic violence publicly pushed for by Kafa. Through years of campaigning and raising awareness, activists actually succeeded at influencing the public discourse around domestic violence. Further, as this participant noted, the occasion of International Women's Day (IWD) was strategically used as a day of campaigning in this context as well. Another, older participant who used to be engaged with Meem and Nasawiya recalled the IWD back in these days during which they would all focus especially on the issue of domestic violence:

“So every eighth of March... I still remember very well. Every eighth of March we used to go down to the streets in all Lebanon, for example once I went to Sour. And, you know, from North to South we talked to women, or whoever we found on the streets, about the topic of domestic violence [...] And there was this boy I remember him, he's stuck in my memory. He was with someone... I asked him about domestic violence. He responded of course no. Later, he came back alone and told me about his mother you know... So, all these debates around domestic violence started to emerge from the street. And based on what we heard on the street. Also, we could form a discourse around how to articulate what we need from the domestic violence law.”

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originated in the early 20th century labour movements in Europe and North America and was a focal point of women's movements in Soviet Russia and socialist and communist movements. Later it got mainstreamed by global women's movements and its adoption by the United Nations in 1977 (ibid.). Today, it still carries a relevance and legacy with marches around the globe, including prominent protest marches in Beirut.

The IWD was thus strategically used by various feminist groups and organizations to campaign for feminist issues. In this context, it was important to take note of the aspect of the street and the emergence of public debates as the campaign consisted not only of protests but also of debates, exchange and educational work. Here, the personal connections that were born out of this work, such as the described situation with the boy who opened up about his mother's situation are especially important and form the heart of this work. All participants mentioned IWD as an important day of protest, commemoration and networking but also empowerment and exchange with fellow feminist comrades. Here, I would like to stress especially the last point as my participation at the IWD march 2019 was also my personal point of entry to the feminist movement in Beirut and the trigger of my engagement with the whole topic and this thesis. As exchange, solidarity, protest and empowerment all come together on this day, I think of IWD as an important, institutionalized form of alliance. Through IWD's official character as an international holiday with a significant history in regard to class-conscious feminist organizing as well as its own legacy in post-war Beirut, it has become an institution of feminist organizing and a manifestation of the movements' broad and diverse character.

#### 4.3.1.1. Forming Alliances, Building a Movement: The Feminist Bloc

This observation can also be traced from the broad representation of different groups who join the IWD marches; including women's rights groups and organizations, small radical feminist groups, student clubs as well as migrant workers' and refugee groups. This broad visible alliance on IWD today is the result of years of cooperative organizing, networking and negotiation processes between groups. One umbrella under which this networking takes place is the *Feminist Bloc*. One of the main arguments this

thesis is built on is that the emergence of social movements such as the uprising of October 17, 2019 generate a fruitful soil for feminist organizing and movement building. This is how the Feminist Bloc was formed in the wake of the 2015 protests and comprises feminist groups, cooperatives, student clubs and networks with the goal to build a strong feminist grassroots movement (Makki, Mawla, et. al., 2018). Its function is to form a platform for a broad alliance of cooperative and sustainable feminist organizing independent from funding and donor agendas that currently dominate the feminist scene as described at length in chapter three.

The broad alliance of different groups within the Bloc is the result of years of hard work and politics of exchange, communication, networking, negotiation and more importantly, acceptance and learning processes. One older feminist stressed the importance of the Bloc's existence and said:

“I think it was *Dammeh* [Cooperative] and others who started it...They built an alliance that was so strong. I was genuinely shocked to be honest because the people in there usually don't agree on anything... I mean you have the state feminists, I mean the very traditional women's rights organizations. And we even discovered some *TERFS*<sup>6</sup> among them, like later through conversations. But honestly, this whole thing was brilliant, really hands up for what they did it was amazing. And they did something we couldn't do, because back then, we used to go to the meetings of women's rights organizations and once one of the women asked me 'What is this short hair cut, is this a subversion to society?' (laughs)... There was also a discourse around the 'We are feminists but nobody should criticize men, we just want our rights' kinda stance. So intersectionality was a main topic of debate, also because we had refugees and non-Lebanese among us...”

This statement illustrates the gaps and differences between generations of feminists as well as the clashes between feminists and more traditional women's rights activists. To add, it shows the differing approaches between women's rights activists who are very focused on the aspect of respectability as opposed to more radical

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<sup>6</sup> Trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

feminists who understand feminism in broader terms and use it as an entry point to questioning the underlying systems of power behind the lack of rights for women. This sense of intersectionality the new generation of feminist activists established over the years is not only discursive but also visibly manifested itself in performed activism for example on the IWD march 2017 that took place under the slogan “Different Causes, One Struggle”. This slogan thus forms a translation of the Bloc’s politics of bringing forward an intersectional, diverse and inclusive feminist analysis which is also supposed to reflect the Bloc’s members. In an essay on the formation of a Feminist Bloc in Lebanon by the five feminist activists May Makki, Mira Mawla, Islam Khatib, Hanine el Mir and Sarah Kaddoura in 2018, the activists clarified that IWD played a significant role in the context of the formation of the Bloc and the structures of organizing behind it (Makki, Mawla, et. al., 2018). Regarding the foundations on which the Bloc is built, the activists stated:

“We agreed on certain values at our early brainstorming meetings, including cooperation, solidarity, respect despite differences, safety, and open discourse. Our aim now is to make this movement even bigger and stronger, to be inclusive of groups beyond those who started the bloc in 2015 [...] We want feminist solidarity to reach marginalized individuals and groups who could not participate, no matter the reason” (ibid., p. 366).

Though the Bloc is surely not yet as inclusive as it aims to be, I assess the formation and existence of the Bloc as a significant pillar of contemporary feminist activism in Beirut and a fruitful soil for sustainable feminist organizing.

#### 4.3.1.2. On Alliances and Solidarity

When I asked the interlocutors about their ideas on alliances, I specifically had the alliances between local feminist groups and migrant workers’ groups in mind. In the

early stages of this research, my conception of solidarity and alliances was marked by an imbalance of power; thinking of solidarity as some sort of exchange or even something a more powerful party granted a less powerful party. This conception of solidarity was thankfully soon to be shaken up and shifted after some insightful conversations I had on the issue. In a published interview, activist and editor in chief of the feminist journal *Kohl/Ghiwa* Sayegh said:

“In terms of the different demographics, I think there’s a very fruitful movement of migrant domestic workers who are activists and who work on migration issues. In the past ten years or so, they have converged with feminist groups, while retaining their own work and their own groups. We’ve been trying to not only work on their stories and publish their narratives, but also to work with them on the sidelines. We’ve tried to find ways to be in solidarity with them without taking over. This is a major issue with preexisting practices of solidarity—the privileged party often ends up taking over and appropriates other people’s struggles. That’s not something we want to do” (Sayegh, 2019).

Here, Sayegh outlined the problem of the mentioned power imbalance in practices of solidarity. Thus, the question is how to practice allyship and solidarity in ways that do not reproduce existing power relations based on an unequal distribution of privilege. While it is easy to claim goals like this one, it is not easy to actually implement them. A hint on how to lower these imbalances came from one participant who suggested to be mindful about the difference between alliances and solidarities:

“For me, alliances are solidarity [...] For example when I go and demand rights for the migrant domestic workers and migrant workers in protests on the streets, it's not because I'm in solidarity with them. It's because feminized labor and underpaid labor and domestic labor and reproductive labor are tools that have been used historically against women and against women of color in particular, against women from the global south, etc. And so, this is how the cause speaks to me and we're part of the same group like I'm not in alliance with her, I would take a different position there [...] So like I would mind my positionality.”

This participant thus argues that protesting alongside people of communities she does not belong to, such as in this case MDWs, does not necessarily mean that she is

doing anyone a favor or that their oppression is detached from hers. On the contrary, her understanding of liberation roots in the idea that the oppression MDWs experience is inherently linked to hers through structures of oppression that affect them both. While I understand this argument, it is necessary to clarify the ways in which Lebanese people benefit in direct and indirect ways from systems that oppress MDW. Invisibilizing this relationship in such discourses bares the risk of not accounting for the unequal grounds activists stand on.

#### 4.3.1.3. The other Side of the Coin: The fine Line between political Values and Reality

Asking about difficulties and problems in the framework of organizing and activism, the issue that was brought up the most and mentioned by almost everyone, was harassment. All participants mentioned that harassment is one of the main themes that are discussed in various contexts within their circles and meetings. According to them, harassment constitutes a primary concern of the feminist activist agenda in public as well as within the groups. Unfortunately, there are numerous cases of harassment within civil society activist groups and feminist groups. One participant told me:

“Yes, there’s a lot of discussion for real about someone for example who was a sexual harasser. And then he apologized and blah, blah, blah but... What should we do with these people? What do we do when we are organizing with leftist men who are misogynistic? What do you do if you want to organize with the workers? The workers of electricité du liban who work there, do you think this guy doesn’t go home and beats his wife? What do you do with this? I don't have an answer. So it's harassment and it's also how to organize with people who are workers in labor unions without, so either you explode or... We also have these debates around prison, around police state, in the whole country we have a debate around the army right now, and militarization and securitization... But harassment is a big thing. What do you do with your comrades? What? And... How do we really... Like, what type of alliances do we want to build?”

I think the point raised here is significant when thinking about alliances. What comes to mind is asking where do we, as feminists, draw the line with whom to ally or not to ally with. In addition, the aforementioned question of solidarity as an exchange, based on a power imbalance should be reflected in this context. Since many lack a consciousness for sexism, homophobia, racism or classism and reproduce these structures in their discourses and actions, how are leftist, class-conscious feminists supposed to react? Whose responsibility is it to build these ties of solidarity and whose responsibility is it to resolve these questions and to do the educational work? On the other hand, I also wonder whether the assumption that workers are sexist or racist is based on classist misconceptions or painful personal experiences. Further, the second point raised by the participant, the question of how to deal with cases of harassment within activist circles is of high importance. To some, one solution to this issue simply constitutes a refusal to work and organize with men in activist contexts. While I understand this stance when it comes to internal structures within feminist groups, I wonder whether such a dismissive standpoint even towards alliances can be expedient. Here, I suggest a context-sensitive approach with respect to the concrete goals. While I view an exclusionary stance towards men in feminist circles and in the context of advocating for feminist issues in many cases as productive and useful, I doubt that this approach makes sense in contexts where the goal is formulated in more general terms like the uprising of October 17 that aimed to change the political system. Finally, I regard the last point mentioned by the participant, the debate on securitization, police and army as highly insightful as she naturally linked the issue of masculinity and its consequences with issues of militarization and securitization. Following, a question emerges on how to ally with groups that may have different stances regarding police brutality and militarization.

While alliances form an important base of feminist activism, the politics of alliances are often sensitive and subject to complex processes of negotiation.

#### ***4.3.2. The Strategic Use of (In)visibility***

Since the beginning of the economic crisis in Lebanon, migrant domestic workers (MDW) were among the communities who suffered the most under the dramatic progress of the crisis as many Lebanese employees stopped being able to afford paying the workers, leading to thousands of MDW being brutally kicked out of households with no money or shelter, many had not been paid for years of labor under inhumane conditions (HRW, 2020). Although employers are legally obligated to pay for every day of labor as well as the MDW's return ticket to their home countries, many ignored these obligations with no fear of facing any legal consequences by the state (ARM, 2020). As some found shelter in shared accommodations in poorer neighborhoods in the Eastern outskirts of Beirut, the situation dramatically worsened following the Beirut blast on August 4, as these neighborhoods were among the most affected. Reportedly, among the over 200 people killed in the blast, 43 of whom were Syrian refugees in addition to migrant workers and Palestinian refugees, out of which some remain unidentified today. Shortly after the blast, Farah Baba, feminist activist and employee at ARM stated in a press interview, "We counted 13 dead and four missing by our own means. They include Filipinos, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and one Kenyan woman [...]. But the number of migrant workers killed in the explosion is undoubtedly much higher" (Makooi, 2020). This did not come as a surprise, ARM stated in a press release just a few days after the blast, "Migrant workers and refugees are systematically dehumanized and marginalized in Lebanon, in life as in death" (ARM, 2020). In addition to the casualties, many were heavily injured and lost

their homes and belongings in an instant. In addition, some relief efforts reportedly deliberately excluded non-Lebanese people and employed higher securitization measures that led to added discrimination and violence against non-Lebanese people (ibid.). Starting in early 2020, the pictures of thousands of homeless MDW camping in front of their embassies, demanding support and the return to their home countries went public, stirring international criticism (Hodali, 2020). By the time the magnitude of the blast became fathomable, the international calls for a change regarding Lebanon's position on and practices of Kafala became louder and the responsible caretaker minister of labor Lamia Yammine was repeatedly asked to take action regarding the matter, putting her under heightened pressure.

To calm the situation down, minister Lamia Yammine broke her silence on the matter exactly one month after the blast, on September 4, 2020, and posted a tweet announcing the issuing of an order to abolish the Kafala system and the implementation of a standard unified contract, securing the protection of rights of migrants and domestic workers in Lebanon (Yammine Douaihy, 2020). People and organizations working on the issue for years, such as the local desks of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as well as local NGOs like ARM and others were quick to react with harsh criticism. One participant who works for ARM told me:

“I was so angry, because my job is mostly to shape the discourse around the issue. And then I was flooded with Congrats messages from journalists saying, ‘Bravo Kafala has finally been abolished. Congrats!’ And I was like ‘What are you talking about?!’ [...] ARM has existed for like 10 years, 10 years that we're working on that... And then for one tweet, to get people to say, ‘Oh, my god Kafala is abolished, yalla, let's and work on other things’. To me that felt super structural, in the sense that it comes from an official power source, the ministry of labor [...] I knew the next day, I was going to call her advisor and they would say, ‘Oh, we were misunderstood by the public. We did not mean to say that the standard unified contract abolishes the Kafala system’ [...] I mean when you're in a position of power and you deliberately conspire around the cause [...] I really don't doubt that she did it on purpose because everyone was bugging her the entire time [...] And then, with one tweet she knew [...] ARM and

other organizations and other groups they'll be busy for a month talking to journalists around the world, telling them it's not true.”

There is much to say about the Lebanese state which does not and will not take responsibility for its actions that harm everyone residing in Lebanon, the institutionalized and state-sponsored discrimination, maltreatment and abuse of women, non-Lebanese workers and refugees, and especially non-Lebanese women who are workers and refugees, the ways in which the Lebanese state has turned MDW into imported commodities that generate profit through a highly exploitative system, evading its responsibility to provide accessible public services such as nurseries and healthcare services (ARM, 2019). All these examples are proof for how the state invisibilizes all of these and more circumstances for self-preservation. However, my main point of emphasis here is the fact that the reason why we know, talk and write about these issues, are activists, grassroots movements and organizations like ARM, Eгна Legna and many more who tirelessly campaign for, protest against, inform about and organize around them. I argue that by way of doing this work, they first name and thus visibilize the struggles that are forcibly erased and second, actively fight them by creating improved circumstances for many suffering people. Subsequently, the use of visibility primarily aims to first raise awareness for the structural injustice of issues that are generally deemed unimportant or taboo and second, do justice where injustice is the norm.

Using visibility as a strategy is inherent to feminist movements that put forward an intersectional analysis. Tracing the intellectual lineage of intersectionality within activism and social movements to end violence against women, Ange-Marie Hancock highlighted the importance of the “visibility project“ within these movements (Hancock 2016, p. 40). She argues its uses are threefold with first, undoing the “invisibility of the

diversity within communities struggling for justice“, second, “holding perpetrators of violence accountable and not inviting the state to further oppress their communities“ and third, “the strategic use of both visibility and invisibility to fight for systemic change“ (Hancock 2016, p. 42). Within the feminist movement in Beirut, I see a similar strategic use of visibility and invisibility. By way of using strategies of visibility such as campaigning, protests, social media and others, activists shed light on political grievances that are deliberately ostracized.

#### 4.3.2.1. Naming and Shaming

An example of the use of visibility as an activist strategy is the practice of “naming and shaming” (Finn 2020, p. 44). By that I mean the public naming and shaming of harassers and abusers on social media, a practice several participants mentioned within the interviews. An example of this practice is *This is Lebanon* (TIS), a platform that draws attention to the abuse of domestic workers, publicizing victims’ stories and their abusive employers since 2017. Their Facebook page is well-known with currently more than 125.000 followers (This is Lebanon, June 2021). Their Facebook biography reads:

“The stories of abuse of domestic workers in Lebanon shall no longer be hidden. We now have a way of making our voices heard. Read our stories and weep. Share widely to help bring change. End the Kafala (slavery) system. You are our madams, our misters, our agents, our embassies, our consuls. You have confiscated our passports, withheld our salaries, starved us, physically and sexually abused us, cut off contact with our families, imprisoned us in your homes and offices, treated us like Hoovers by getting us to clean multiple houses, made us sleep on your balconies and kitchen floors, screamed at us, and even murdered us. We have suffered in silence while we've walked your dogs, raised your children, washed your old peoples' bottoms, and cleaned your homes. The time of silence is over. Listen up.”

The unapologetic tone prevalent here is indicative of TIS' clear and direct approach to the matter. As the horrendous treatment of MDWs in Lebanon is state-sanctioned through the Kafala system, a system that not only facilitates but explicitly promotes this injustice; attempts to bring justice to the victims through legal channels are deemed to fail in most cases. Notably, Lebanese journalists reporting on cases of extreme violence and even murder against MDW have been threatened, interrogated and had to face judicial consequences for their work, proving yet again the state's complicity (This is Lebanon, 2021). Initiatives like TIS, follow an approach of strategic visibility to shed light on what is supposed to stay invisible, aiming to establish justice where there is no hope by making these cases public. While doing so, the people behind the campaign mostly stay invisible or act as a group behind a name, reducing the risk of legal trouble and thus making use of an interplay between visibility and invisibility to achieve their goals. Allison Finn (2020) argued that the tools of shame and visibility may facilitate the establishment of "an alternative form of 'justice', in the form of compensation, apology, validation of harm experienced, and/or revenge or accountability" (Finn 2020, p. 46). According to her, this may repress the socially accepted experience of violence facilitated by the state. Further, in making public the inhumane acts of intense violence and abuse, I see first, an attempt in taking revenge and second, an unapologetic way of confronting the silent majority with the acts and structures of injustice they are complicit in. Thus, visibility is strategically used by activists not only to shed light on prevalent political and societal grievances but also out of a need for accountability and justice. With their activism, they are not only advocating for this need but also as Ange-Marie Hancock phrased it, "transforming a justice system [...] willing to overlook women of color as victims" (Hancock 2016, p.

54). This is manifested in small successes such as public debates on the issue, trials or the fact that the responsible minister faces public pressure to act as mentioned before. With their valuable work, platforms like TIS investigate, explain and eventually visibilize what is supposed to stay hidden under the heavy blankets of state-sanctioned oppression. Finally, they help create an environment in which political and societal issues can be publicly addressed and eventually, named and shamed. Here, another example I would like to mention is the public campaigning of women in Lebanon who expose their harassers and rapists on social media, among them the prominent case of Marwan Habib who allegedly sexually harassed and raped more than 50 women (Sheikh Moussa, 2020).

#### 4.3.2.2. Can you afford being gay? On Strategic Invisibility

Against the backdrop of the discussion of the links between (in)visibility and feminist activism, several participants pointed out the links between (in)visibility, class and (in)dependence. This factor was especially emphasized regarding lifestyles that are not considered “respectable“ in Lebanese society. Referring to the matter, one participant told me:

“Here in Lebanon, it’s always the case of people who have the ability to be financially independent or a little bit independent societally speaking from their families, like for example people who manage to come to Beirut to work or people who come to Beirut to study here. They’re the ones who can do that, they can become gay in Beirut and return to their hometowns to be straight again.”

A lesbian participant who has been based in Beirut for years after moving from the South, told me she felt she was independent from her family’s influence because of the financial security she gained by working and earning her own money. This gave her first, a reason “respectable” enough to stay and live alone in Beirut after finishing her studies. She emphasized the importance of financial independence in her case that she

achieved thanks to a job at a big international organization, which she managed to obtain after receiving several university degrees. She further stated that in Beirut, she felt like she can do whatever she wanted, but every time she went back home, she still felt obliged to follow her family's established rules. Further, knowing her family would not approve of certain aspects of her lifestyle, she was secretive about her private life. The case of this participant is representative for the lives of so many. There is one aspect I find crucial to pay attention to here. Her independence is contextual. While in Beirut she has a feeling of independence and control over her own life, in reality her perceived independence has clear barriers and limitations. She manages to shape her life however she pleases while enjoying the anonymity of Beirut which grants her more possibilities than if she were to be confined within the limitations of her family home in a Southern Lebanese village. Ultimately, she benefits from the invisibility and anonymity the city grants her. In a violent context that criminalizes her existence, this invisibility is strategically used for her own benefit and exclusively enabled by the privileges of university degrees and a well-paying job.

In that respect, a further aspect mentioned by several queer participants was the concept of "coming out of the closet" and "being out and proud" as Western concepts that do not apply to their contexts. One argued:

"[the word queer] is not part of my identity. [...] I use it as a descriptor so people know if I am into them or not [...] So what I'm trying to say is that for me, if my grandparents, or whoever, aunts, uncles... It's not important for me that they know about my sexuality. And this is something that I think can be talked about in a cultural context. And that we have to think about in feminism in Beirut because in the West, where things are highly individualistic and coming out is such a strong narrative that so many people identify with, and for them, there's a pride in seeing visibility.... You know? And that's fine. But I don't want to be told that I'm oppressed just because if I tell people that I am queer then I would face issues. But anyway my sex life, my private life, is not something I want to talk about with these people."

While visibility and representation is a key strategy of the LGBTIQ+ community in the West with pride marches and festivals and the rainbow flag as common sign for queer pride, this strategy is not necessarily adopted by other queer communities in the rest of the world. One of the reasons might be the emphasis on individuality in the West, as mentioned by the interlocutor. Another reason of course is the criminalization of homosexuality in Lebanon and the rest of the region. In that context, another participant who identified as queer described visibility as something restricting and dangerous:

“I would rather be invisible [...] Specifically about my queerness because that's the scariest part... I would rather be invisible and like living my best life, like the queer community here is very... everyone knows everyone within it, but like no one outside knows. And we identify each other [...] That's important to me this invisibility, because I can hide from my parents and also cause like... I don't want to walk around proud because I'd rather be invisible and survive. Yeah. You know, and I think a lot of times queer people who have a certain level of privilege or maybe their parents are open minded, or maybe they can leave the country can feel like ‘Yeah, I'm out and I'm proud’. But for me, it's like, I'm not gone. I don't want to... I can't be out like that.”

To her and many others, invisibility constitutes a mode of survival. In a context that violently tries to oppress the existence of queerness, hiding one's queerness is often not a choice but the only way of securing physical safety. This circumstance forms the grounds for the necessity of a feminist movement that advocates for queer justice. During the uprising of October 17, as well as long before that, feminists loudly and visibly advocated for queer justice as well as other topics, breaking taboos and thus bending the limitations of the allowed while as much as possible securing the safety of individuals. Based on their feminist critique and by protesting in crowds, it was possible to publicly make demands and have positions that are criminalized in Lebanon. This happens not only during protests on the streets but also in other spheres of life, such as in writing on the internet, on which I expand more on in the following chapter.

*Monopolization of Visibility as Legitimacy*

Finally, in the context of visibility and activism, an aspect that came up in several interviews is the added visibility of a few activists that are especially visible online (and offline) which can lead to false perceptions of leadership. One participant critiqued:

“So if you think of feminists in Lebanon, you have very few names that come to mind that are very much people who are out there on social media, I mean, including myself, now, you know, like, the vocal people to speak about specific issues, because they have a presence or because they have, I call that a privilege of like, access to knowledge, you know, publishing and you know, being in those institutions where you can put yourself out there. And I think that's monopolized and also very, it's infuriating, because it's not representative.”

What this participant calls the “monopolization of legitimacy” is an issue frequently critiqued by many activists not only in the Lebanese context. There are several points to be taken into account here. While I think it is valuable to have public figures who are outspoken as spokespeople for social movements, it is not always clear how these people came to these roles. In a digitized world, a big following on social media means capital both as a platform as well as opportunities, that open up. In the Lebanese context that is very small, these roles are oftentimes occupied by the same people over years. Unfortunately, not everyone gets to have these chances which are also linked to privileges people may have, including language skills, social skills, university degrees or looks. This thus triggers the question of the ways in which visibility involves exposure and how this can be used and misused and the question of how exposure can be distributed equally in a way that is considered fair or comprehensible for others. A start can be questioning who gets to be included in activist circles, who gets to decide which topics are prioritized, which demands are made or which language is used as the dominant language of organizing and meetings. As the monopolization of visibility

contradicts the community aspect of feminist organizing, this debate finally brings us back to the critiques that were illustrated in the previous chapter.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

This chapter's objective was to first, gain an understanding of feminist activists' conception of justice and second, to analyze activists' performed activism. I argued that feminist activism is essentially a longing for justice and provides a sense of self for feminists. Further, feminist activism is a translation of this longing into concrete action. On the question of activists' conception of justice, I identified three main issues of organizing that build the foundation of feminist activism in Lebanon; gender justice, economic justice and racial justice. From these findings, I derived that intersectionality as an idea is central in the discourse on and understanding of justice feminist activists present.

Regarding the ways in which activists perform their activism, I showed that alliances, solidarity and strategic visibility constitute key strategies of feminist activists in Beirut. I presented the issue-based alliance between radical and reformist feminist organizations, as well as International Women's Day as a day of protest, commemoration and networking but also empowerment and exchange with fellow feminist comrades, as examples of the practice of alliances. Further, I highlighted The Feminist Bloc as a manifestation of the growing trend of alliance and feminist movement building that functions as a platform for cooperative and sustainable feminist organizing independent from funding and donor agendas. With regard to the strategic use of (in)visibility as an activist practice, I demonstrated different examples based on the argument that the use of visibility primarily aims to first raise awareness for the

structural injustice of issues that are generally deemed unimportant or taboo and second, do justice where injustice is the norm. For the strategic use of visibility, I contended that activists make use of it not only shed light on prevalent political and societal grievances but also out of a need for accountability and justice. Here, I specifically provided examples of campaigning around victims of the kafala system and sexualized violence. With regards to the strategic use of invisibility on the other hand, I argued that invisibility often constitutes a mode of survival for many. Here, I focused on examples of queer activists. To extend my analysis of performed feminist activism, in the next chapter I will examine the relationship between knowledge, theory and activist practice within the feminist movement.

## CHAPTER 5

# ON FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY: PRACTICES OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION AND EXCHANGE

### 5.1 Introduction

Moving from strategies of practiced feminist activism discussed previously, I assess practices of knowledge production, distribution and exchange as additional key elements of feminist activism in Beirut. This thesis is built on the premise of questioning the notion of what is considered to be knowledge “worth knowing”. One of my aims was exploring the relationship between knowledge, theory and activist practice within the feminist movement. In this chapter, I firstly contextualize different notions of feminist epistemology. I then explore activist practices regarding production, exchange, translation and archiving of knowledge. As I identified a gap in the literature around the topic of feminist knowledge production, distribution and exchange as a form of activism, I aim to introduce questions worth exploring further in this chapter.

When I started university during my undergrad in Germany, I was taught that knowledge and knowledge production within the academy are objective. This was supposed to be reflected in my writing, which was the reason why I was asked to use the passive voice and never the personal pronoun “I”. The logic behind it was simple: if the knowledge produced within the institution of the academy is considered to be objective, the author is irrelevant since the results would always be the same. Additionally, as a first generation university student, my personal relationship with academic knowledge has always been uneasy. I struggled with academic language, the complexity with which simple ideas were usually presented and I did not understand the

processes behind canonical literature and theories. I often wondered who decided what I got to read, learn and discuss in university. Later in grad school, things changed and I was taught to “own“ my writing, that I was accountable for what I write, the opinions that I reproduced and the knowledge I produced. However, when I discovered feminist theory, I was finally able to make sense of the different approaches to knowledge production and learnt that I was not the only one who had an uneasy relationship with theories and knowledge production. Generations of feminist scholars in the field of feminist epistemology have been preoccupied with issues revolving around the gendered dimensions of dominant conceptions of knowledge production, objectivity, practices of inquiry and justification (Anderson, 2000). In this context, Donna Haraway’s concept “situated knowledges” is important to highlight. She coined the term in a 1988 essay, which still has far-reaching theoretical influences today (Anderson, 2000). She deconstructed the idea of objectivity, which she claimed to be harmful and misleading. According to her, supposed objectivity is a “view from above, from nowhere from simplicity” (Haraway 1988, p. 589) which in fact concealed a specific position, that of the male, white heterosexual subject whose knowledge is deemed as objective and gets universalized due to his position of power. This process, which she described as “the god trick”, subsequently leads to all other positions to be viewed as subjective and hence invalid. Precisely this tactic persists in a heated public political debate today under the headline “identity politics”, aiming to invalidate especially women’s voices as being partial and biased. As a counterposition, Haraway argued for “a politics of epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard and to make rational knowledge claims” (p. 589). In the practice of positioning oneself, she saw an act of accountability, which

“resists the politics of closure, finality” (p. 590). Years before, Audre Lorde (1982) wrote in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*: “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive”. Lorde’s positioning accounts for an act of self-empowerment, refuses the supposed objectivity and thus unravels the god trick. With her famous self-description as “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet”, she locates herself and her work and explicitly writes out of this position.

By understanding knowledge production as situated, power relations become more apparent and the focus shifts towards the questions of who is speaking, who is heard and ultimately, who is relevant. Meanwhile, feminists were not the only ones to formulate a critique of objectivity but postcolonial scholars as well. Prominently, Achille Mbembe (2015) critiqued “Western epistemic traditions” as “traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower”. Juxtaposed, he suggested a decolonization of the university including multilingualism and a “radical re-founding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions”. Against this backdrop, bell hooks (1991) illustrated how theory and theorizing from a place of pain, struggle and trauma can be liberatory and may hereby serve the collective struggle for liberation. To her, theory and activist practice are interlinked and equally important, which is why she made the case for creating theory that advances the feminist movement. As her post-modern feminist colleagues did, she criticized the culture of hierarchy and domination within academia perpetuated by practices of gatekeeping in the context of whose texts are acknowledged, read, published and whose texts were not. She was also critical of the general structures of academic knowledge and language, which is institutionalized to be and to stay exclusive. hooks is fundamentally critical of

the ways in which theory is taught and dealt with in the academy and opens the path for legitimizing the theorizing of the personal. Using the example of incarcerated black men who read and reviewed her work in prison, she advocated for theory that is understandable, accessible and “directed at transforming consciousness, that truly wants to speak with diverse audiences” (p. 10). Deconstructing the very foundations of the academy through epistemological considerations, questioning processes of knowledge production and exchanging ideas are pivotal aspects of academic feminist practice. The presented contributions show that knowledge, the way it is produced, taught and used can be and is broader than pure information. As highlighted, knowledge is used to construct hegemonic narratives. Further, theory can be a tool of resistance as bell hooks elucidated or a companion and means for survival as Audre Lorde proved. Wondering about the practical implications of these theoretical considerations, I asked the participants in what ways knowledge and theory are relevant within the framework of their activism, where they derive their knowledge from, in what form and which language(s). The participants’ answers reflected that knowledge, be it academic, native or feminist, does account for a remarkable part of their activist practice in various ways as will become evident in the following pages.

## **5.2 Mobility of Ideas, Community and Alternative Ways of Knowledge Production**

As highlighted earlier, interlocutors described their paths to feminist consciousness and activism as marked by personal experiences. They further recounted that after realizing their experiences were structural, they often turned to theory and literature to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences. In doing so, many have voiced that their first encounters with feminist literature was in the English language.

That is because many of the activists I talked to are educated in English through high school and university and hence very comfortable reading and thinking in English. Further, they described how they first came in touch with feminist literature that was almost exclusively Western and in English or French, with works like Simone De Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Reflecting on their own journey to feminist consciousness, several participants have described their personal entry to the field through Western feminist literature in English as problematic. Many stated that reading Western ideas and works on feminism and activism was unsettling after some time since it is not applicable to their personal context living in Lebanon and does not match their lived realities. One told me:

“Truth be told, like when I was first acquainted to like these [feminist] materials, they were in English but then there was the purposeful exercise in trying to find writing that we have produced here in our languages. So I do read in Arabic. And I do read the work of my colleagues, because there is a little bit of a I think, elitism in what we perceive as like knowledge worthy of knowing, when we say these are the classics.”

Interestingly, by means of questioning what is knowledge worthy of knowing, this participant linked the topic of language and in which languages we read, think, write and work in, to another important issue, that is who produces the knowledge we consume. She continued her statement by saying:

“We have many women we work with. We think together, we produce stuff together [...] I read to people who are organizing with us and I also write and I hope that they read to me and I think it contributes to flipping the narrative about who decides what knowledge is worthy of knowing.”

The content of this statement reflected a general sentiment all participants shared, that is the importance of the community aspect of consuming, understanding,

distributing, debating and producing knowledge within feminist activist circles. Many have mentioned frequenting reading retreats because they value the significance of co-education, as well as conversations with fellow feminists. Many have described these opportunities of communal discussion and analysis as well as the exchange of ideas, feelings and reflections, as enriching and crucial in order to build a collective awareness and understanding about feminist issues. In the approaches of community learning through reading groups, sharing circles, retreats and other forms of coming together, I see tactics that aim to break the binary of knowledge worth knowing and knowledge that does not count as real knowledge by way of rejecting the hierarchization of knowledge and lowering the threshold of access to it. Further, this is how spaces and opportunities for the co-production of knowledge that are rooted in a communal understanding of issues came about, acting as a clear alternative to existing narratives. While knowledge production and adhering to scholastic norms of what is considered publishable and the politics of who gets published form serious obstacles for writers, I saw that community may be helpful in the process by offering moral and emotional support as well as communal thought practices to writers. In doing so, the exclusivity of academic institutions, especially in the West is not only challenged by new knowledge and voices that challenge the status quo but even the very act of the way knowledge can be alternatively produced. Hence, exchange, community and a process of communal knowledge production in and of itself stand in opposition to the pillars of traditional ways of generating knowledge.

In the digital age, the described processes of exchange and knowledge production of course also take place on the internet. One participant mentioned how she

grew into feminist consciousness through the Muslim feminist blogosphere around ten years ago:

“There was a really strong uhh blogosphere that’s very niche for Muslim feminists. So there’s like 7-8 women who were following the same framework who were drawing up on Amina Wadud, and Fatima Mernissi or whatever. Like all those really really big Muslim feminist scholars. And they’re using them to kind of draw on their daily lives, to draw on their reflections that they do. So this was a big string for knowledge for me to then branch out from there. But it kind of fragmented or we grew out of it a little and we stopped being as involved in this topic.”

While she does not identify with the framework of Muslim feminism anymore, she stated how the time spent in exchange with the Muslim feminist scene was a crucial part of her process of coming to feminism. Further, through the internet, transregional and global networks can be built opening up interesting dimensions and opportunities for feminist organizing. This particular point is mapped out later in more detail.

Another important aspect worth mentioning in the context of community is what I would call the mobility of ideas and knowledge. When I asked about the academic and possibly exclusive nature of access to feminist knowledge, a participant who used to be engaged with Meem reflected:

“Yes, it was still in the academic realm in a certain temporality where it is only discussed. But we also had a feminist library. Okay, so our feminist library, and our feminist librarians basically also brought these ideas. And there was this mobility between all these conferences on queerness and feminism. So whosoever would go, would bring back certain ideas. However, the way they challenged these ideas is not.. I mean, I think it’s very amateur, because we were very young. [...] And there were fights on queerness and you know, the rainbow was a big, big, big huge issue because imperialism and identity politics was brought up eventually in the group when we first started Meem.”

By valuing the community aspect and the ideas of exchange and communal learning in the context of knowledge, new possibilities open up. The existence of a feminist library that was part of Meem’s space, for one was crucial to obtain knowledge

and for the exchange of ideas. In addition, community organizing also means that, for example, one does not attend conferences for oneself and the prestige it might entail but to bring back ideas to communally explore and analyze. This is how the threshold can be lowered regarding who gets to travel to attend international meetings and conferences. Furthermore, from a non-Western perspective it is interesting to think through the question: with whom are activist communities in contact and how can exchange and cooperations be practically arranged? On the issue of feminism and queerness, the question at hand is to what extent South-South mobility and exchange are even possible for activists due to legal obstacles in many countries as well as travel restrictions. To add, structural problems like the lack of funds for such connections are important to mention. If the exchange happens with Western queer communities and conferences, hierarchies between participants and funding entities or political disparities like the mentioned issue of the rainbow flag pose further problems. The latter is part of a bigger debate on Meem's critical positioning towards international mainstream LGBTIQ+ discourse of pride (Mourad 2016, p. 182).

### **5.3. Local Knowledge and Alternative Inquiries**

In the debate on epistemology and the importance it takes in our lives and activism, it is not only important to question whose knowledge is worth to be known but also by which means knowledge and theory get formulated. The interviews for this study demonstrated that the intimate act of coming together and sharing personal experiences orally in itself can be both powerful and meaningful. Thus, questioning processes of knowledge production also means questioning the ways in which knowledge is being formulated and distributed. One interlocutor stressed the importance

of acknowledging feminist histories and histories of activism by reading but also through oral history, uttered by the older generations of women and activists.

“And when you try to trace like our ancestors, the feminist ancestors that have lived in this region and what they've left in writing, which is why oral histories are so important. So I rely on oral history of our families like talking to the tetas, talking to the neighbors.”

This statement generates the question of the relevance of oral accounts vis-à-vis written texts. Generally speaking, the use of oral history as a primary source is not to be underestimated because it lets subjects speak in their own language, emphasizing what is important to them personally. As a method with “the radical and democratic potential to reclaim the history of ordinary people and raise working-class and women’s consciousness” (Sangster 1994, p. 11), it might uncover stories and histories that might not have been expressed otherwise. In her statement, the participant referred to and acknowledged feminist ancestry and legacies. The fact that there is a history also constitutes the counter-narrative to the aforementioned argument of feminism being an imported, Western ideology which is used widely especially by religious and political authorities. The same voices frequently claim queerness and the call for a decriminalization of LGBTIQ+ to be a Western ideology or invention that has been widely refuted by the scholars of the Middle East (Amar and El-Shakry 2013). At the same time, queer feminist activists bemoan the Western hegemony around queer culture and discourses “Everything we do is in resistance of white feminism all the time, or white LGBT kinds of politics and I regret that very much. I wish we could have done it as part of liberation movements”, one activist told me. One famous attempt to change the narrative around the topic such as Joseph Massad’s investigation of homosexuality in an Arab context, *Desiring Arabs* (2007), has been criticized as being “incapable of

conceptualizing Arab subjectivities outside of the discursive and identitarian framework of complicity with the West” (Hamdan, 2015).

#### **5.4 To Exist is to Resist: Local Sources of feminist knowledge, knowledge production in Arabic and the feminist practice of translation**

There are various endeavours of local feminist knowledge production that are part of the previous conversation on locally produced knowledge production and at the same time aim to counter the notions of Western hegemony within local discourses around queerness and feminism in Lebanon. My main argument is that activists engage in various ways to produce, challenge and distribute feminist knowledge such as reading, writing, translating, sharing, producing, publishing or archiving mainly for two reasons. First, to exist. By that I mean to prove that their existence, their livelihoods, experiences, anxieties and desires are real and valid to the world. Second, to resist the structures of power that oppress them by theorizing personal experiences to empower others in similar positions and represent marginalized and invisibilized livelihoods. These two points mutually define each other. In the manifestation of existence, I see resistance. The resistance to the status quo, the resistance to the structures of power that oppress and kill on their way to self-preservation. Finally, products of knowledge, be it a written book or article, a podcast, a piece of art, a video or something else constitute repositories to archive feminist existences, to make them traceable and to build community.

In my research for this thesis, I identified a number of platforms carrying locally produced knowledge including blogs, social media accounts, podcasts, articles or videos. As I deemed it important to understand Lebanon within the context of colonial and imperialist influences, as they significantly mark contemporary political

circumstances and the academic institutions in Lebanon, I specifically looked for sources of feminist knowledge that follow approaches, which center local subjectivities. There are a few to be mentioned here, some are in English, some in Arabic. Among those I identified are the blogs *Sawt El Niswa* and *the A Project Blog*, the Facebook and Twitter account *Akhbar Al Saha*, Instagram accounts like *Kharabish Nasawiya*, *Beirut By Dyke*, *Khateera* or *This is Lebanon*, the A project podcast *Fasleh*, the platform *Wiki Gender*, the academic journal *Kohl*, the book *Bareed Mesta3jil* and the Youtube Channel *Haki Nasawi*. In the following, I briefly present four types of locally produced feminist projects: the book *Bareed Mesta3jil*, the journal *Kohl*, the YouTube Channel *Haki Nasawi* and the online platform *Wiki Gender*. I chose these four specifically because they are devoted to the goal of knowledge production from a local perspective, centering indigenous voices while using a clear, understandable language, securing their accessibility. With the exception of *Bareed Mesta3jil*, they all produced their content in Arabic as main or second language.

*Bareed Mista3jil* (Express Mail), published by the queer feminist collective Meem in 2009 and republished in 2016 is a collection of anonymous autobiographical short stories based on the real stories of and conversations with 150 queer and trans women residing in Lebanon, in which the personal, political and economic implications of queer women's sexualities in Lebanon are discussed. The book's title provides the reader with a taste of what they are about to be confronted with, "It reflects both the urgency of getting these stories across and also the private nature of the stories – like letters written, sealed, and sent out to the world" (p.10). In the Prologue of the Second Edition, the editors wrote:

"We believe that our stories should remain alive and available for us, and for those

who want or need to access them. Many lesbian, queer and trans-individuals inside and outside Lebanon share experiences and stories similar to those in this book. We were them once, and we needed to read stories that felt like ours, that spoke for us, and that amplified our voices. [...] In a world that is moving and shifting rapidly, preserving history becomes an act of personal and political value: a declaration of continuity” (Bareed Mista3jil 2016, p. IV).

The book serves as a repository of personal lived realities that are structurally invisibilized by the state and society. The book makes these subjectivities traceable by providing stories that can be accessed and used for anyone who needs it. Through the act of collective writing about and translation of personal experiences, queer feminists “politicized gender and sexuality as sites of community-formation and social activism” (Mourad 2016, p. 164). Besides Bareed Mista3jil, Meem also founded an online magazine called *Bekhsoos* which included varied political and personal commentaries on issues related to gender and sexuality. One participant told me “We used to write a lot and I give credit to Bekhsoos alone for actually making a writer out of me. I love writing [...] Bkhsoos is the first place I ever wrote something that I published, you know, and a lot of us did“. By not abiding to the restrictions of classic media and academic platforms, Bekhsoos provided a space for new, young writers to experiment. Further, the process of telling and textualizing these stories communally, provides a sense and space for community from which social change can be evoked. This is how the stories in Bareed Mista3jil constitute a powerful and courageous counter-narrative to the prevalent state of heteronormativity, proving that an alternative exists despite all attempts of elimination.

Anonymity is a central aspect of queer publishing and conditions the publication of these personal stories (Mourad, p. 167). It allows to problematize and theorize issues around gender and sexuality that centers the collective rather than the individual

(Mourad, p. 180). Reflecting on the topic of queer expression in the Arab World, gay

Lebanese singer Hamed Sinno wrote:

“Anonymity is a liminal space of queer potentiality, between the invisibility we must bear to survive, and the visibility we need to live. It is where we find, heal and love each other as our ancestors have done for generations. While the world will not tell our stories, we must tell them ourselves, even behind closed doors. Outside, the writing is on the wall: we’re here. We’ve always been here” (Sinno, 2020).

Anonymity can hence be seen as a strategy to explore the (im)possibilities and potentialities of criminalized existence in contexts that punish, oppress and kill.

Anonymity grants the needed safety for people while building a discourse around topics that are considered taboo, bending and breaking the barriers of the sayable.

*Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* is a peer-reviewed feminist academic journal on gender and sexuality in the Middle East, South West Asia, and North Africa based in Beirut and Paris. It was launched out of the idea to challenge dominant narratives around gender and sexuality research in regions outside of the West that are often marked by orientalism and fetishization. The journal’s declared objective is to “trouble the hegemony of knowledge production, and ensure that our regions and communities play a central role in redefining their own intersections and challenges when it comes to feminist and sexuality research” (Kohl, 2021). The journal publishes in Arabic, English and French, with a special focus on Arabic to emphasize its relevance as a knowledge producing language. For this reason, Kohl translates articles submitted in English or French to Arabic. Kohl is an example of a platform for accessible transnational feminist knowledge production. It does so by using a variety of strategies. First, its practice of centering postcolonial regions within the process of knowledge production around feminism, queer theory and decoloniality, stands in

contrast to the idea that these issues originate in Western Academy and center the West. Second, by facilitating and conducting critical scholarship that questions the dominant narratives and analytical frameworks usually applied to these regions, they help build an epistemic counterbalance. This counterbalance is supported by Kohl's use of language. Publishing in English, French and Arabic as equal languages of knowledge production, their content is accessible to a wide public. With the emphasis on Arabic, Kohl makes it a point to counter the epistemic hegemony of Western languages in the academic realm. Further, by publishing a variety of alternative formats besides classic academic journal articles, such as essays, opinion pieces, art works or audio visual content, translation also takes place from classic academic knowledge with its tight corset of formality to other realms of knowledge and its processing. Third, there is a low threshold for submissions, encouraging especially inexperienced academics and graduate students to submit contributions. More so, all these aspects are complemented by the fact that all issues of Kohl are accessible online for free, which probably constitutes the most important contrast to classic academic journals that are inaccessible to a public that is not affiliated with universities. As a result, I observe an example of democratization of knowledge.

Wiki Gender [الجندر ويكي](#) is a collaborative transnational feminist platform that produces feminist and gender-related knowledge in Arabic and was created in 2017 (Naceur, 2017). In addition, they translate texts and academic papers on gender and feminism into Arabic. The platform further experiments with the Arabic language to contribute to making it more inclusive (مشروع: "About Gender Wiki", n.d.). Wiki Gender is a remarkable project for various reasons. First, it provides and processes a wide range of knowledge in Arabic. Second, it serves as an archive for feminist

knowledge production and third, it actively engages in the process of changing the language around gender in Arabic. One of the participants who is engaged with Wiki Gender strongly critiqued feminist civil society actors who produce and circulate knowledge only in their circles without sharing it or making it accessible to a broad public. By that, she included the language aspect that is often not inclusive due to the use of English or French or academic lingo. To her, Wiki Gender is a passion project and she saw great potential in the field of making knowledge accessible in Arabic. She also viewed it as a way to involve and talk to people outside of the known feminist circles that she called “exclusionary” and homogenous in nature. To her Wiki Gender is special because it operates beyond circles and borders. She told me:

“The project started in Egypt and then it came to Lebanon. Now, there’s a group in Lebanon, a group in Egypt, a small group in Tunis, a group in Syria and lately a group from Palestine and a group from the Western Sahara joined us. [...] Right now, we are still working in a very organic way. We just thought.. since we are working online anyways, we can also do it in cooperation with people in countries that we can’t physically go to anyways. Like Palestine, we will never be able to [...] And now we’re doing things online so let’s do it. And then we were especially thinking about the links between feminism and colonization. And then people came and joined us, especially because it’s a platform in Arabic and it’s addressed to all Arabic-speaking people, regardless from where the group is working.”

Through the internet, Wiki Gender transgresses the limitations of national borders, political divide, occupation and war and imagines an alternative reality for the region. By intentionally teaming up with people in places they cannot physically access in order to think, work and create together, they essentially set an example for transregional Arab feminist cooperation and solidarity. By communally thinking through the links between coloniality and feminism within the confinement of national borders, they explore the (im)possibilities of transgressing the imposed limitations.

When I asked another participant about developments around knowledge production in Arabic, one told me:

“There are various attempts to do that. And they have been done historically, like we come from a long history of people trying to produce in Arabic and making that content accessible. There are also the class boundaries to like how many people it's accessible to. So there are the people whom for example, we trust their politics, we trust their content, and their content is very radical, but it's available on online platforms, it's not accessible to everybody and also, it's only accessible to people who will look that up. It's not something that is mainstream. It's not something that you would see when turning on the TV and find around but now it might be that it's more accessible through like other forms of media such as like videos or like WhatsApp messaging.”

An attempt to make feminist knowledge in Arabic more mainstream and accessible is Haki Nasawi. Haki Nasawi *حكي نسوي* is a YouTube Channel that informs about, contextualizes and explains common debates, historic events and definitions around feminism in Arabic. The channel was created in 2020 by Sarah Kaddoura, a feminist activist based in Beirut who identifies as a Palestinian socialist feminist. In her first video, she explained her primary motivation for the channel's creation with the lack of feminist resources in Arabic she noticed growing up, when she first came to feminist consciousness. She declared that with this channel she aimed to help create a wider feminist consciousness “to be able to face the patriarchal system that works against us” (Kaddoura 2020, 1:04). The videos on the channel cover a range of issues with titles like “What is patriarchy?”, “Radical feminism”, “Black feminism”, or “The Right to Abortion”. In all her videos, Sarah uses a clear, easily comprehensible language to explain big issues in short periods of time. With her educational work, Sarah carries out valuable community-oriented work. By processing hardly accessible knowledge for a wide public, she provides the feminist tools and analyses she herself longed for when she was younger. Once again, I want to emphasize the language aspect.

In contrast to Kohl and Wiki Gender, her channel processes knowledge in a non-Academic manner. The video format makes it easily shareable on Social Media. Like that, it is possible to reach people outside the academic sphere.

#### ***5.4.1. On Translation***

The examples Bareed Mista3jil, Kohl, Wiki Gender as well as Haki Nasawi show that the practice of translation seems to be a crucial aspect of Arab feminist epistemological practices. Through translation, activists provide access to feminist contributions to international debates on a wide range of topics. Further, they break the hegemony of European languages by making knowledge accessible for a large audience. I argue that the acts of translation and knowledge production in Arabic constitute a democratization of knowledge. Moreover, my definition of translation goes beyond the mere translation from one language to another but also the translation of knowledge from one context to another. This can happen for example with concepts and ideas that travel across time and space but also the translation of debates from academic contexts to a political or activist discourse. Hence, through the epistemological practice of translation, the borders of nation-states or power structures that are intentionally set up to divide, differentiate, limit and oppress can be transgressed by imagining alternative realities of communality beyond physical (im)possibilities. Bareed Mista3jil, Kohl, Wiki Gender, Haki Nasawi and many more provide us with spaces to imagine alternative realities, aiming to change the lived realities we exist in.

#### ***5.4.2. Archiving***

As stated, Nasawiya as well as Meem do not exist anymore but their legacy lives on. This is how collectives that were founded later like Dammeh Cooperative and others are built on their experiences and their established discourses. In addition, activists who

were engaged with Meem and Nasawiya continued to organize around feminist issues within other groups or as individuals. In Nasawiya, I discern a feminist collective that remarkably influenced the feminist discourse in Lebanon. Accordingly, there are still some traces from the time in which Nasawiya was actively organizing as a collective. One of these traces is their Youtube Channel which still exists albeit it has been inactive for 10 years. The channel's content is varied with videos from protest activities and interviews, but also campaign videos attempting to raise awareness on different issues around gender justice. In a video called "Feminists Discuss Feminist Filmmaking" (Nasawiya 2011), the filmmakers who were mostly behind the camera for the videos on the channel explain the motives behind their activism. One filmmaker said that she felt it was easier to access the public online because the internet is less restricted and censored regarding political posts. She viewed posting videos as a first step in order to gain access to a wider public and to raise awareness regarding certain issues. A more important point that was mentioned is the need to archive. Explaining her motives, one filmmaker said:

"Part of what I do is archive everything that's going on from the birth of Nasawiya to the Women's Day and when we go to the streets and when we take on direct actions. Because I feel that when you have that proof and when you can show people that you're actually acting, that you're actually doing something it can also motivate them a lot. Because hearing about 50 people walking down the street shouting feminist slogans is one thing, reading about it is one thing. But actually seeing it, seeing their energy and hearing their voices is a completely different thing."

The video itself is a reflection on past activities and campaigns and the motives behind them. Among these activities they reflected on, is the "Jismi" campaign, which aimed to raise awareness on sexual and bodily rights for which Nasawiya produced a number of videos without a budget. The activists explained how they posted the videos on YouTube to avoid censorship by the state while explicitly targeting a wide, national

audience. They succeeded and were invited by media platforms who aired their videos on national TV. The video also aimed to educate and encourage others who might be interested in filmmaking as political activism, providing the viewer with handy tips on how to get started.

For communities whose existence is structurally and targetedly questioned and invisibilized, the act of documenting and archiving their activist work, lived experiences and activities is of utmost importance. The act of archiving serves multiple purposes. First, to gain visibility and to prove their existence to a wider audience. Second, to spread their agenda and to reach like-minded people in the search for community. Finally, archiving can serve as legacy and might help future generations of activists with their work. In an ever-changing world and in the context of the business of everyday politics, clear documentation visibilizes the histories of activists and makes activist processes and trajectories traceable. Reflecting on whose stories and histories count and are heard and whose are not, I established that decolonizing knowledge means deconstructing the ways in which the academy as an institution works as a means to support and strengthen Western interests. Following that, I see a link between the efforts of silencing indigenous voices and stories by colonial powers and the silencing of specific narratives and histories by nation-states. The practice of silencing and censoring is always based on the goal preserve the dominant structures of power. One example of how this practice is manifested is the aforementioned example of invisibilizing local feminist and queer histories.

On a final note, it is necessary to mention that both Kohl and Bared Mista3jil are financed through the German *Heinrich Böll foundation* in Beirut which is closely tied to the German green party, operating with numerous offices around the world. Wiki

Gender is financed through the German *Goethe Institute* in Cairo and supported by the Arab Digital Expression Foundation. Haki Nasawi operates with the help of financial sponsors via the platform *patreon*. Due to the lack of local institutional support, all these endeavours are dependent upon Western institutions to finance their projects, which yet again ties decolonial approaches to colonial and imperial structures. This is the reality of NGOization and dependency of funding, mostly from Western donors. As discussed, the participants heavily critiqued this point, mostly because of the power dynamics that arise thereof.

### **5.5 Anti-intellectualism**

bell hooks' (1991) mentions another aspect worth taking note of, that is the silencing and "anti-intellectualism" she was often confronted with by people within black activist circles who held negative or opposing views towards knowledge production, theorizing and the academic practice in general. Comparatively, she tied this to the silencing and hurdles black women and women of colour experience on the part of academic institutions because their work does not adhere to the academic guidelines (hooks 1991, p. 7). During my fieldwork, I encountered this kind of opposition to my study as well and I am familiar with anti-intellectualist discourse from my personal environment. While all participants did happily talk to me and shared personal stories with me, some criticized the very act of theorizing feminist activism, rightly linking it to the academy's exclusivity and classist bias. One participant said:

"So, what I would like is because most academics like you're doing now, you know, they base it on activists on the ground. It's not like they come out of you know.. it's not like they brainstorm something, they actually do research they do field research, they do interviews they do they do they do.. but what happens with it is that usually those theses just stay in universities. That's what I hate."

This participant thus critiques the cycle of academic knowledge production that relies on the knowledge of the “research objects” to produce knowledge inaccessible to the same populations. Another participant even uttered regret about agreeing to past academic projects and sharing intimate details of activist practice that was misused for academic purposes. I listened to these claims carefully and understood where these statements were coming from, particularly with the more experienced participants whom are fetishized for academic purposes as well as by international media as I explained earlier. In most of these cases, the critique focused on foreign researchers who are often not familiar with the context or language, using this kind of research to advance their own careers or even to feed into Western, orientalist narratives. The critiques and fears are important to understand since researchers have a responsibility towards the people they collaborate with and how and for what purpose sensitive information is being used. Moreover, I believe it is our duty as actors within the academic context to make academic knowledge more accessible and understandable.

### **5.6 Conclusion: Imagining the (Im)possibilities of Transnational Feminist Solidarity**

The focus of this chapter lied on the exploration of feminist practices of knowledge production, distribution and exchange as key practices of performed feminist activism in Beirut. I located my work based on an understanding of knowledge production as situated, following the traditions of critical feminist epistemology. Among the participants, I found a general emphasis on the community aspect of consuming, understanding, distributing, debating and producing knowledge within feminist activist circles, manifested through the participation in reading retreats, debates and other practices of co-education. In the approaches of community learning through

forms of coming together, I see tactics that aim to break the binary of knowledge worth knowing and knowledge that does not count as real knowledge by way of rejecting the hierarchization of knowledge and lowering the threshold of access to it. Further, the use of oral history as an alternative way of knowledge inquiry and calls for local knowledge production independent from Western hegemony on issues around gender and sexuality were discussed. A key point of my analysis was the argument that activists engage in various ways to produce, challenge and distribute feminist knowledge mainly to exist and to resist. In engaging in these practices, they first, prove and archive their existence and second, constitutes a resistance to dominant structures of power. I explored four locally produced feminist projects that all challenge dominant narratives on issues related to gender and sexuality in the Lebanese context. I found that all projects essentially contribute to strengthening narratives that were not acknowledged before by visibilizing histories and existences that threaten the status quo. They do so by way of employing different strategies, such as using Arabic as a main language, producing and archiving knowledge easily accessible for free or publishing stories that were supposed to stay unknown to the public. Unfortunately, to this date this is hardly possible without ties of funding that enable this work.

While working on this thesis, for months I was wondering what it means to read, think and write in times of crisis. To me, it feels numbing, empowering and frustrating at the same time. Numbing in a sense that no piece of writing can make up for or bring justice to the lives lost, precarity, the misery and pain of forced displacement due to political neglect, war, economic collapse or environmental catastrophes. Empowering, in a way that the intellectual work we do is of immense importance to educate ourselves and others. I am in awe of and feel deep admiration for activists who tirelessly fight the

injustice and oppression that marked their existence through political activism and organizing in various forms, including theorizing their own experiences, producing knowledge, educating others, sharing and translating resources, caring for one another and many other things. Further, it is humbling to have the privilege to access the vast literature of inspiring authors who provide us with the tools needed to understand how the world around us is constructed and how to fight it. On the other hand, I am immensely frustrated when it comes to the translation of all the beautiful theories, all the deconstruction of relations of power and hegemony into real life politics and political demands.

In times of digitization of almost all parts of life in which most information is found and consumed online, the significance of online activism is paramount. While of course online activism should be examined critically as stated earlier, sometimes a post can go a long way. In reaction to the current situation around the illegal dispossession of Palestinians in Jerusalem, Beirut-based Palestinian feminist activist Islam Al-Khatib wrote on her blog:

“As a refugee in Lebanon, I can only observe, stand witness and share news. However, I believe in the power of campaigning and I believe in the power of an ambiguous collective working together towards a common goal. Therefore, I invite you to face and challenge this ecological violence: tweet, write and share news about Sheikh Jarrah. Help save Sheikh Jarrah” (Al-Khatib, 2021).

While I am watching videos from protests around the world in solidarity with Palestinians, read tweets and posts like this one by Palestinian feminist activists in Lebanon, I wonder about the potentialities of transnational feminist solidarities. For this reflection process, taking Beirut as a starting point, shaped by its people that are scattered and diasporic due to a constant political situation that is both unliveable and unsustainable, seems useful. The presented activist strategies, be it questioning,

deconstructing, allying, (in)visibilizing, writing, sharing, producing knowledge, synthesizing or translating all serve the goal to act and resist against the powers that oppress but also to inform, think together and in that to find community beyond the borders imposed by colonial interests and reinforced by political divide. These activities are motivated by a necessity and a longing for an alternative reality that is imagined through the act of breaking the barriers of current realities. Here, knowledge is political and the use of knowledge not an exclusive, classist endeavour practiced within the premises of universities, but a tool of resistance. Reading and reflecting on feminist accounts that I presented in this chapter, I wonder about the links between the (im)possibilities of transnational feminist solidarity and knowledge production. I wonder what reading, debating, writing, thinking together may channel, whom it may serve. I wonder who is helped with all these efforts to question, deconstruct, explain and fight. I wonder how many of us actually are out there, asking the same questions, sharing the same dreams of a better tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK: MOVING TOWARDS HOPE

“India’s a very interesting place. There's no formal opposition, but there’s genuine on-the-ground opposition. If you travel around—there are all kinds of people, brilliant people journalists, activists, filmmakers, whether you go to Kashmir, the Indian part, or to an Adivasi village about to be submerged by a dam reservoir—the level of understanding of everything we’ve talked about—surveillance, globalization, NGO-ization—is so high, you know? The wisdom of the resistance movements, which are ragged and tattered and pushed to the wall, is incredible. So... look to them and keep the faith” (Roy and Cusack 2016, p. 65)

Though referring to a very different context from the Lebanese one, this quote by Arundhati Roy resonates with me a lot. After around twelve months of working on this thesis, talking to feminist activists, learning about their work, reasoning, motivations, fights and resistance, I begin to grapple what Roy calls “the wisdom of the resistance movements“. It is precisely this wisdom that led to the uprising of October 17 and the collective heightened political awareness that followed after. The same inherent wisdom shone through during, and became evident after I conducted the fieldwork for this study. Finally, the certainty of this wisdom’s existence leads me to close this thesis on a hopeful note, despite the devastating circumstances currently prevailing in Lebanon.

In this thesis, I examined the meaning of feminism according to a specific portion of feminist activists in Beirut. To answer the main question at hand, *What does feminism mean to feminist activists in contemporary Beirut?*, I conducted a qualitative study to explore the feminist movement. With a distinct focus on the personal narratives of activists, I approached the question at hand by adopting a biographical research

methodology. Therefore, one-on-one semi-structured interviews constituted the core of this study. To complement my findings and to get a broader picture of the movement, I conducted a textual analysis of material produced by and about activists roughly over the past decade. Black feminist theory and especially the concept of intersectionality were core pillars of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Beginning the exploration in the sphere of the personal, in chapter two my focus lied on processes of growing into feminist consciousness, tracing activists' personal stories. One significant finding here was that personal experiences of injustice that triggered participants' interest in feminism, usually influenced their future activists trajectories. These experiences touch on different issues, including poverty, sexism, growing up in times of war, or the effects of the political and societal framework of sectarianism. I argued that questioning gendered dimensions of everyday acts that are largely both normalized and institutionalized in social relations as well as developing a class consciousness both constitute key factors of growing into feminist consciousness. Finally, a key finding was that secularism and a clear opposition to sectarianism as a political system are a key characteristic of feminism in Beirut.

In chapter three, I attempted a characterization of the feminist movement in Beirut with a focus on the structures of organizing, ways of funding, issues of NGOization and community-oriented organizing. I made the observation that most activists used a clear language of differentiation regarding trends and positions within the movement they did not identify with. Subsequently, I argued that these habits of othering significantly affect activists' performed activism. I further focused on the aspect of NGOization as it posed a main point of contention among the activists and was significant to understand structures of organizing within the feminist movement. As

the vast majority of feminist and women's rights organizations in Lebanon depend on international donors and funding, I contended that the often used classification that builds on an imagined binary between funded and unfunded is limited in value. As a global trend, I argued that NGOization and the power dynamics that arise from funder-grantee relations pose a threat to civil society activism by way of mainstreaming radical movements through funder agendas that do not match local activist agendas. However, I pointed out the dilemma many activists found themselves in as employees of NGOs. As a final takeaway of this chapter, I argued that community forms a key aspect of contemporary feminist activism in Beirut and is manifested in many aspects of performed feminist activism. Based on my findings and analysis in chapters two and three, one of the main arguments of this thesis is first, feminism essentially is both, a longing for justice and provides a sense of self for activists.

Following this argument, in chapter four, I examined feminist activists' conception of justice and second outlined activists' performed activism. Regarding activists' conception of justice, I identified three main issues of organizing that build the foundation of feminist activism in Lebanon; gender justice, economic justice and racial justice. From these main issues, I inferred that intersectionality as an idea is a key element of the discourse on and understanding of justice of feminist activists. Drawing from the literature on intersectionality, I outlined four strategies historically used by black feminist activists in the context of their struggle for liberation. First, the political use of lived experiences, second, strategic solidarity, third, building alliances and finally, strategic (in)visibility. Based on my observations, I argued that these strategies form key strategies of feminist activists in contemporary Beirut. I thus highlighted the ways in which these strategies were manifested in the framework of activists'

performed activism. For example with regard to the strategic use of visibility, I contended that activists make use of it not only shed light on prevalent political and societal grievances but also out of a need for accountability and justice.

I located my fifth and final chapter based on an understanding of knowledge production as situated, following the traditions of critical feminist epistemology. In this chapter, I focused on feminist practices of knowledge production, distribution and exchange as key practices of performed feminist activism in Beirut. Echoing my observations regarding community-oriented organizing, I found an emphasis on the community aspect of consuming, understanding, distributing, debating and producing knowledge within feminist activist circles. Here, I saw tactics that aim to break the binary of knowledge worth knowing and knowledge that does not count as real knowledge by way of rejecting the hierarchization of knowledge and lowering the threshold of access to it. My main argument in this chapter was that activists engage in various ways to produce, challenge and distribute feminist knowledge mainly to exist and to resist. In engaging in these practices, they first, prove and archive their existence and second, constitutes a resistance to dominant structures of power.

Finally, I would like to note that with this study I hope to have provided a space of reflection for my feminist comrades as well as I hope that these pages may reflect thoughts, questions and arguments present within the movement or similar contexts. At the closing part of this thesis, I find myself in a situation in which I feel like I have only scratched at the surface of what needs to be explored. Of course it is important to note that this thesis does not claim to cover feminism or the feminist movement as a whole. It rather focused on a small portion of feminist activism in Lebanon. I hope that this study constitutes a fertile soil for future research, by way of both, the knowledge

generated, as well as by triggering new questions to be explored. Here, I would like to specifically encourage analyses from a transnational lens with a global focus, investigating links, solidarities or similarities between feminist movements globally.

As this thesis was written during a time of political crisis and collapse, I considered it important to reflect on this specific temporality on several occasions throughout. As many crises came together in the year 2020, for many, it culminated in collective feelings of shock, numbness, anger and helplessness. Islam Al-Khatib, a Palestinian feminist from Lebanon reflected on the year of crisis and wrote:

“How many times has the world ended? We’ve witnessed the apocalypse at least a thousand times. My family’s world ended when el-Nakba took place. Many people’s worlds, and lives, ended in the civil war, 2006 war, 2014 war...endless war. Many women’s worlds ended due to violent men who ‘get away with it’. Our worlds ended when the Beirut Aug 4 blast ‘happened’. My world is stuck in a never-ending loop of apocalypses and the ‘holy’ return to whatever ‘normal’ we’re led to believe in”. (Al-Khatib, 2021)

Islam naturally linked the events of 2020 to the many other crises that have marked her life. In doing so, she described the feeling of being in a constant state of crisis, something many participants have mentioned during the interviews. As life in 2020 Lebanon felt like the apocalypse, Islam questions the notion of “normalcy” and what it may or may not entail. Loosely based on Theodor Adorno’s “There is no right life in the wrong one” (Adorno, 1947), the question arises: What does it mean to long for a state of normalcy when what is considered to be “normal” is not and should not be normalized to begin with? Having lived the ecstatic moments of the first weeks of the uprising of October 17, as well as the period of devastating lows that followed soon after in 2020 and 2021, writing this thesis essentially also became a process of trying to make sense of these things. This development was inevitable as everything that has happened over the past years in Lebanon has deeply affected not only me but everyone

around me and all the people I talked to during the fieldwork for this study. The way I see the world has been essentially reshaped by these events and this is how, my thinking, my writing, my analyses have taken many turns throughout. This study is an attempt to think through, understand and deconstruct events and developments we have lived from a feminist point of view. The decisions which topics to write about, which quotes to include and essentially how to write a thesis that does justice to the topic at hand, guided by feminist principles of solidarity and kindness, has been weighing heavy on me. However, being privileged to learn with and through the narratives of my feminist comrades and the words of brilliant authors, thinkers and artists whose work, experiences, feelings and anger I built my analysis on, has been a deeply humbling, enriching, and empowering experience. Sara Ahmed taught me to see feminist theory as something we do ourselves, with our activist, emotional and intellectual labor (Ahmed 2017, p. 25). The activists I got to meet taught me to see feminism as a survival mechanism. Our conversations showed me that feminist theory provides us with the knowledge to understand the world around us and the tools to deal with and fight it. In the process of writing this thesis, I essentially learned that creating feminist theory is a participatory process, located at the core of the personal, born out of its necessity. Feminist theory is the safe haven where I find refuge when the world yet again hurts more than I can bear and where I can recharge hope whenever I am in desperate need for it. Analogically, Islam Al-Khatib concluded her above mentioned essay on a hopeful note, saying:

“If I have learned anything this year, then it’s that the concept of hope we should advance must be coupled with grief and is thus found in practices rather than particular emotion. We’ve all become a bit too familiar with the lurking anxiety, the looming sense of fatality; the creeping awareness that nothing can be put right. I want us to name it. I want us to learn to become companions with grief. Here, I side with Lesly Head and say: instead of asking ourselves the overly simplistic question “what

should we do?”, I suggest rephrasing it this way: if we are assuming that we will be part of the future, how can we articulate and enact the necessary creative human interventions — the creative destruction- dismantling the mess we’re in, and a variety of restoration and repair activities?”

Islam invites us to transform the feeling of hopelessness into action by providing a framework to dismantle the reality we live in without forgetting to acknowledge and deal with our losses and pain. As explored, feminist activism and organizing constitutes a necessity for many. To me, the feminist presence and resistance to the neglect, oppression and violence performed by the Lebanese state and society is essentially revolutionary as feminist activists prove that an alternative reality is possible by both living and simultaneously fighting for it. While the reality seems painfully hopeless, activists pave the way for a better tomorrow by virtue of refusing to give up. It is this resistance that creates the space and paves the way towards change. All participants, activists, groups, organizations, initiatives mentioned in this thesis are part of this change. Knowing they are part of the future, I refuse to lose hope for a better tomorrow.

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