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## **Mobilization and Advocacy since 2011: The Case of Lebanon**

*Diala Haidar, Mona Harb,  
Bernadette Daou, Janine A. Clark*  
**Edited by: Mona Harb**



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***October 2019***

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# Introduction

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At the time of writing the introduction of this report (December 2019), the streets of many cities and towns across Lebanon are filled with protestors denouncing the corrupt leaders who parasited the sectarian political system, extracted public resources and misappropriated foreign aid for their own gains. It is not the first time that the frail Lebanese political system is challenged, but it is the first time that the uprisings reach such an unprecedented momentum, scope and scale. Protestors are focused on socio-economic demands; requesting the return of stolen public money, an independent judiciary system that can hold corrupt rulers accountable and trace theft, an interim government that is able to restructure public debt in equitable ways while protecting the most vulnerable, and the organization of early and fair parliamentary elections. They are mobilized in the main Lebanese cities, from the North (Tripoli) to the South (Tyre, Nabatiyeh) to the Bekaa (Baalbeck) and, of course, in Beirut. Protestors' profiles cut across class, sect, education, age and gender. Women groups are very visible and vocal in the streets, and the presence of LGBTQ+ groups is also quite salient in the capital city. The scene is well occupied, in addition, by an array of groups that have been engaged in alternative oppositional politics for several years now, some of whom have participated in the municipal elections of 2016 and in the parliamentary elections of 2018 (and failed, except for one individual who became a member of parliament in 2018).

Definitely, the groups that we see today in the *sahat* (public squares/spaces) have been organizing, learning, networking, growing and

mobilizing intermittently as oppositional actors, in ways that ultimately led them to first coalesce during the #YouStink protests of 2015 (*al-Hirak*), then during the elections of 2016 and 2018, and now during the October 17 uprisings. This coalescence is surely not devoid of internal tensions and conflicts, which constituted important reasons for the collapse of the 2015 Hirak and for the failure in forming a solid oppositional parliamentary front in 2018. However, the coalescence efforts in 2019 seem to be quite different. While it is still too early to analyze them, it is possible to note significant efforts to learn from previous mistakes, such as refusing to identify leaders or spokespersons for the uprising and refusing to negotiate with the government, which are also elements constituting the Achilles' heel of the uprising and which detractors laugh off as too loose, permeable and amorphous.

In this report, we uncover **four domains of mobilization** that have been unraveling over the past decade in Lebanon, and that have been playing significant roles in the series of protests and uprisings characterizing the scene of oppositional politics in the country. These are collective action focused on **civil and political rights, urban rights, women's rights, and GSBM rights** (Gender, Sexuality, Bodily and Marginalized Groups' rights). Each domain was investigated according to a common set of questions. We asked authors to map actors organized in political and/or social action (such as movements, civil society organizations, unions and other forms of collective action). We also invited them to conduct a descriptive analysis of approaches, methods of advocacy, and key event(s) that influenced the policy domain studied, as well as to examine how power configurations were formed. Moreover, patterns of structure, tactics of collective action and types of issue framing were investigated. The following list of questions guided the investigation of each category:

- **Actors:** Who are the most prominent actors? What are their distinguishing features? Were there organized campaigns? How did changes in the national and transnational political context (cf. Arab uprisings), if any, impact the capacity of organizing of different actors? What are the types of relations among diverse actors, including labor unions, and how do these relations influence organizing?
- **Advocacy:** How was the advocacy issue formulated? How independent were these claims, and how did this strengthen or weaken the position of actors? Were actors successful in creating movements, groups and/or campaigns that mobilized people on these topics? How cohesive/fragmented were they? What was the impact on the ground? What were the most important tools and tactics utilized (protests, strikes, media outreach, coordination mechanisms, litigation support, other)?
- **Impacts:** To what extent were these actions effective, in terms of influencing decision-making? What were the pivotal stages that contributed to (re)formulating the issue?
- **Patterns/Framing:** How did the actors frame their discourse and transform it into a public issue? How did the political context contribute to strengthening or weakening the position of different advocacy movements and groups?

In the first chapter, **Diala Haidar** examines “the ebbs and flows of Lebanon’s postwar civil society”, underscoring how political and civil rights movements seek to challenge the sectarian political system, despite a range of constraining control mechanisms. These foundational movements progressively inspire new forms of activism, which have become increasingly successful at shaking the system, especially after the end of the Syrian occupation in 2005, in the aftermath of Rafic Hariri’s assassination. In the second chapter, **Mona Harb** investigates these new mobilizations and studies the struggles of urban rights’ activists that consolidated after the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, leading up to several successful campaigns that were later epitomized by Beirut Madinati in 2016. **Bernadette Daou**, in the third chapter, unpacks the four waves that produced the Lebanese feminist movement and enabled it to position itself today with a feminist political-economic agenda and with novel strategies of organizing and action. In the fourth and last chapter, **Janine Clark** examines how

GSBM activism transformed into a network of collectives, with various polarities, of which the feminist bloc forms a cornerstone, and how they mobilized various strategies to advance their goals. The chapters share at least **three key themes** related to mobilization and advocacy in Lebanon, which are presented below.

### *(i) The hegemonic context of political sectarianism*

Set up by the Taef agreement in 1989, the post-war **sectarian political system** in Lebanon has consolidated sectarianism to an extent where the sectarian elites have penetrated public institutions at all levels. This hijacking enabled the consolidation of clientelistic networks and the **reproduction of sectarian identities**. This sectarian political system has elaborated a range of sophisticated disciplinary tactics that enabled its reproduction. Such tactics facilitated the control of sectarian elites’ own constituencies through electoral laws that are based on gerrymandering and uncontrolled money spending, in addition to more subtle affective techniques. The sectarian political system also reproduced itself by preventing viable challenges to its workings, through strong **repression and recuperation tactics**, epitomized by its notorious recuperation of the labor unions. Tactics range from policing and violent repression to co-optation, including smear campaigns, propagation of rumors and intimidation.

### *(ii) The challenges of mobilizing and organizing against many odds*

- Despite the hegemonic apparatus of sectarianism, **mobilization and advocacy in Lebanon have been active across many spheres**. We study here political and civil rights, urban and environmental rights, as well as women and GSBM rights. Punctual successes can be noted across these spheres, such as the establishment of public agencies (e.g. ministry of environment in 1992), the elaboration of laws (e.g. the rights of the disabled in 1997), the holding of elections (e.g. the municipal elections in 1998), the withdrawal of the Syrian Army (2005), the organization of advocacy campaigns (anti-sectarian movement of 2011, and many others), the discontinuation of detrimental urban projects (e.g. Fouad Boutros highway, Dalieh resort), the access to better urban rights (e.g. the opening of Horch Beirut) and gender-based rights (the neutralization of Article 534 that criminalizes homosexuality), and the participation

in elections (e.g. Beirut Madinati, Kulluna Watani). Mobilizing and advocacy operate in “waves” (Krolloke and Sorensen 2005, quoted in Daou) or in “cycles of mobilizations” (Tarrow 2011, quoted in Daou). Some have been ongoing for several decades (e.g. feminist groups, political and civil rights groups), while others are more recent (e.g. urban activists, GSBM groups). Several generations of activists have impacted organizing and collective action.

- Since 2011, the **strategies of action** transformed significantly and rapidly, especially with new media technologies and digital tools, and are now integrating various mechanisms and tools of mobilizing. These include coalition building and networking, which sometimes extend beyond national boundaries (e.g. GSBM groups) and lead to larger and more effective platforms during mobilization (e.g. the Feminist Bloc includes 25 groups). They also include advocacy and campaigns, which sometimes connect to state actors - formally or informally - in an attempt to lobby for legislation (e.g. Beirut Madinati with Beirut’s municipality, LebMASH with the ministry of health). Interestingly, several groups (especially feminist and GSBM groups, as well as urban activists) are working on creating safe spaces and community activities that bring people together to discuss or celebrate the issues they advocate for, or to simply connect as a group and build a sense of togetherness (e.g. community meals, public discussions and events, book launches, fundraising activities, open-houses).
- Activist groups are not devoid of **internal tensions**, which often fragments and disrupts organizing and collective action. Often, such disputes are caused by the lack of a common political framework, limited cohesion and poor organizational structures that guarantee effective decision-making and accountability. Activists also suffer from their platforms being mostly populated by full-time volunteers, rather than dedicated political organizers.

### (iii) Civic spaces, coalescence and the building of a shared togetherness

Over the years, groups working on mobilization and advocacy have organized in ways that managed to create a range of **civic “spaces”**, where **political consciousness** is being nurtured alongside networks of solidarities. These civic spaces are not necessarily groups’ headquarters, but are also activists’ homes, cafés and bars, as well as more formal meeting rooms in hotels or universities, or borrowed private spaces where the groups meet.

These scattered efforts at building a political society have been very difficult, nonetheless, given the limited human and financial resources, internal group tensions and fragmentations across the activist spheres. Indeed, the **coalescence** of these groups only began in late 2015 with YouStink/*Al-Hirak*, which marked the start of a series of attempts to combine disparate efforts at protesting sectarian politics and policies, and to begin contesting and claiming power through political participation, and more recently through direct action. These efforts culminate with the Beirut Madinati municipal campaign in 2016, the Kulluna Watani parliamentary platform in 2018, and the October 17, 2019 revolution that is still unfolding. It is only with the October revolution that we start experiencing **substantive collective efforts at networking groups beyond the capital city and across activist spheres, and at building a political society with a shared sense of citizenship and togetherness**. In 2015 and 2016, political and civil rights groups’ coalesced with urban activists, feminists and GSBM groups, environmentalists and student groups. In 2019, they are intersecting with professional bodies, including legal activists (e.g. Legal Agenda) and other left-wing unions that are being recreated from scratch (e.g. *Mihaniyyun-Mihaniyyat*). Demands are becoming radicalized and increasingly *imagined* along political-economic claims that are grounded in values of **social justice, feminism and ecology**. While these revolutionary moments are ripe with hope, they are also violently repressed by counter-revolutionary forces, which are obviously unwilling to give up their reigns. The journey is long, but Lebanon’s oppositional forces may have reached a new phase of organizing; and, more significantly, after having extracted all the country’s public resources and mismanaged international aid, the sectarian political system may perhaps be on its way to imploding.

As many other places in the Arab region and across the world, the story of mobilizing and advocacy in Lebanon inspires, simultaneously, loads of hope and heaps of despair. In this brief documentation of the organizing efforts of thousands of young and old people who have been engaged for years in the struggle to earn the right to live a dignified life, we make a tiny contribution, paying them homage and hopefully enthusing us all to continue the work - each as they can.

## **ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB**

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.






In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.



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## ***Bridging Academia and Activism***

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# ***Project Details***

## **Project**

*Beyond Arab Exceptionalism:  
Transnational Social Movements  
in the Arab Region*

## **Donor**

*Carnegie Corporation of New York*

# Challenging the Sectarian Political System: The Ebbs and Flows of Lebanon's Postwar Civil Society

Diala Haidar<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The Ta'if Accord of 22, October 1989, which ended Lebanon's civil war, governed Lebanon's politics via a corporate power-sharing arrangement that is negotiated and supervised by external powers. This was not Lebanon's first experience with power sharing arrangements. The country's 18 recognized religious sects' coexistence has always been based on the principle of sectarian representation since the *Règlement Organique*<sup>2</sup> of 1861.

Although power-sharing arrangements seek to engineer a type of democracy in deeply divided societies (Lijphart, 1969; McCulloch, 2014; McGarry & O'Leary, 2007), they have, in Lebanon, hardened sectarian identities, blocked trans-sectarian political mobilization and produced recurrent systemic deadlock (Hudson, 1999; Horowitz, 1985; Nagle, 2015).

Breaking with the hegemony of the sectarian system has been an extremely challenging mission for many political groups who struggle for an accountable, just and democratic polity. State-society relations in postwar Lebanon are defined by the active use of the latent coercive power of the state by the political elite to infiltrate, intimidate, or even resort to the repression of opposition groups to veto any reformist efforts (Kingston, 2014). Yet, as James Tully puts it, "practices of governance imply practices of freedom and vice versa" (Tully, 2002); cross-sectarian or anti-sectarian modes of political mobilization continue to emerge in defiance.

This paper examines the potentials and limits of the major cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian modes of political mobilization that contested the sectarian political system around civil and political rights in postwar Lebanon.

## 1. The Postwar Phase: Control Mechanisms and the Reproduction of Sectarianism

Lebanon's civil society is confined to a sectarianized political context and conditioned by the power of the sectarian political elite.

The ability of the sectarian elite to penetrate the state and structure politics, in ways that maximize their access to its resources and minimize that of others, weakened state institutions (Kingston, 2014). This allowed the sectarian elite to hijack the role of the state as a social services provider (Cammett, 2014) and helped consolidate their clientelistic networks, resulting in "state-sponsored sectarian institutions and a sectarianized welfare system which reproduces sectarian identities at the expense of trans-sectarian and national ones" (Salloukh et al., 2015, p. 33).

Unlike in strongly institutionalized states where constitution and laws govern the relation between the state and the society, in weakly institutionalized states, the formal and informal rules combine to make the access of associational life to the state and its resources dependent on the loyalty of its different segments to the sectarian elite, who would empower their allies and sideline their opponents (Kingston, 2014).

The strength of Lebanon's postwar sectarian system is best understood through the work of Salloukh et al. who unpack the political economy and the ideological hegemony of a sectarian system that "permeates almost every nook and cranny of Lebanese life" (Salloukh et al., 2015, p. 3). Employing a Foucauldian method of analysis which unravels the socioeconomic and political power that produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and mobilization in postwar Lebanon, the sectarian system is presented as

<sup>1</sup> Researcher and campaigner for human rights. Her past research focused on civil society and political reform in postwar Lebanon. Her current research focuses on migrants' labor rights in Lebanon.

<sup>2</sup> The *Règlement Organique* of the *Mutasarifiya* of Mount Lebanon (1861-1914) ended the sectarian strife of 1860 and dictated the sectarian distribution of the new political order under the supervision of the Ottoman Empire.

a disciplinary institution that aims at producing docile sectarian subjects abiding by the rules of the sectarian political economy and its ideological hegemony. The strong sectarian system that penetrates all public and private spheres of the Lebanese life is undergirded by “a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist and discursive practices”, which create a “distorted incentive structure” that directs people’s loyalties away from state institutions and towards their sectarian communities (Ibid).

The disciplinary power of the sectarian system in postwar Lebanon and its reproduction mechanisms are what create the structural and agential obstacles for counter-hegemonic social and political forces emerging from within civil society.

### Setting the Stage (1990 - 2005):

Lebanon’s postwar civil society actors who mobilized on civil and political rights had to operate in a political landscape that is constrained by the Syrian tutelage and the postwar sectarian elite. Despite these challenges, a small network of civil society actors managed to grow and set the stage for the rise of some civil movements and campaigns until the late 1990s. They mobilized a number of citizens around demands pertaining to civil and political liberties, national reconciliation and dialogue, and political representation (Karam, 2009).

“The Gathering for the Holding of Municipal Elections” (*Al Liqa’ Min Ajl Al Intikhabat Al Baladiyyah Wal Ikhtiyariyah*), launched in 1997, was among the most significant civil movements in postwar Lebanon. It was a national campaign that gathered 150 associations, unions, political parties and private institutions that are opposed to the parliament’s decision to postpone the municipal elections scheduled for 1998 (Karam, 2006). The movement launched a media campaign and reached out to the people by holding weekly meetings inside and outside the capital. They succeeded in collecting around 100,000 signatures on the petition to hold municipal elections on time (Chabshoul, 2016). The Constitutional Council ruled that prolonging the mandate of municipalities was unconstitutional, and thus local elections were held in spring of 1998. The intense campaigning contributed to holding the

elections on time. However, the movement’s main achievement was in creating a civic space in postwar Lebanon, outside sectarian and clientelistic influences (Kingston, 2014). Most notably, this movement inspired other campaigns that used similar tools and tactics in campaigning, such as the mobilization for the social rights of disabled persons in 1997; the campaign for civil marriage which followed in 1998; and the national campaign for lowering the voting age to 18 in 1998 (Ghaddar, 2001).

This period also witnessed the emergence of an active student movement that mobilized against the Syrian hegemony, the security services’ intervention in public life, and restrictions on the freedom of expression. Its influence, however, remained largely confined to the borders of the universities (Karam, 2009).

These movements helped rebuild Lebanon’s postwar civil society.<sup>3</sup> They succeeded in achieving a number of objectives, namely reinitiating the municipal elections, passing a law on the rights for the disabled, and creating the Ministry of Environment (Karam, 2009). Nevertheless, they failed in achieving any reforms that impact the structure of the sectarian system, such as administrative decentralization or adopting a representative electoral law. Moreover, civil society actors, who sought to transform this activism into a political capital by running for electoral office, were faced with daunting challenges, most notably: the Syrian security services’ manipulation of elections, biased electoral laws, and the absence of limitations and accountability on electoral spending (Kingston, 2014).

Notwithstanding the postwar civil society’s ability to challenge the sectarian system, its ability to bring about socio-political change or institutional and policy reforms was ultimately blocked by the sectarian elite and Syrian security services in this period.

### Missed Opportunities (2005 - 2011):

The mass mobilization following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 opened an opportunity for political change. Yet, despite the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon that ensued, the surge in the number of associations and the public’s receptivity

<sup>3</sup> During the civil war, civil society was active in humanitarian relief for the displaced and the wounded. Moreover, many civil movements and campaigns called for the end of the war (AbiYaghi, 2012). One prominent campaign was the campaign for the kidnapped and the disappeared which was created in 1982. It started in a radio appeal by Wadad Halawani, a woman whose husband was kidnapped during the war. Halawani was joined by hundreds of supporters, and together they founded “The Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and Kidnapped in Lebanon” (Civil Society Knowledge Centre, 2015).

to change, this critical juncture was transformed into a missed opportunity. Indeed, as discussed further below, partisan mobilization dominated the political landscape, and the polarization between what was labeled as the March 14 and March 8 camps led to an increased marginalization of civil and reformist movements. Even though some civil society actors tried to build common civic and political platforms, their role was overshadowed by sectarian and political divisions which reverberated across many civil society organizations.

A number of NGOs, which sought to change the sectarian system, were deeply entrapped in this division. Despite not publicly declaring their political affiliation, some NGOs had an unspoken condition that their members must support one of the two camps (Clark & Zahar, 2015). Moreover, the sectarian elite used all their resources to weaken such NGOs. Their media outlets attacked them, tried to dry up their funding, and blocked their access to areas under their control (Ibid). *Samidoon*, a grassroots collective that was formed at the outbreak of the July 2006 war to provide emergency relief and support for war-affected communities in Lebanon, is one example of sectarian elite strategies. The collective built a network that attracted over 10,000 volunteers from different sects - most of them working together for the first time - but was blocked when attempting to deliver aid to refugees who are housed in schools, in areas that are controlled by the sectarian Amal Movement (Ibid).

Against the backdrop of all these challenges, a number of civil society initiatives continued to emerge and generate broad-based platforms that encompass interconnected civil campaigns. In 2010, The "*Laique Pride*"<sup>4</sup>, a secular movement for citizenship, brought together organizations, networks and campaigns promoting secularism and citizenship rights in Lebanon (Meier, 2015). "The Civil Society Movement", the "AUB Secular Club"<sup>5</sup>, the feminist collective "*Nasawiya*", the women rights NGO "KAFA", among other active associations, responded to the "*Laique Pride*" call and participated in its demonstration. This was followed by a gathering, the "*Rencontre Seculiere*" (*Al Liqa' Al Ilmani*), that was attended by a number of secular groups and

organizations to coordinate efforts in order to build an anti-sectarian movement of a broader social and political base (Ibid).

During this period, civil society movements were directly affected by the political polarization, and attempts at challenging the sectarian system and influencing the mainstream political discourse were ultimately blocked.

## 2- Mobilization on Civil and Political Rights (2011-2015)

### The Anti-Sectarian Movement

The popular Arab uprisings in 2011 reverberated across the Arab world and opened a new opportunity for political mobilization in Lebanon as well. The Anti-Sectarian Movement (ASM), "*Hamlat Iskat Al Nizam Al Ta'ifi*", emerged in 2011 in the aftermath of these uprisings, echoing the slogan "The people want the fall of the regime" which was already famous in Tunisia and Egypt, but with a Lebanese twist, chanting "The people want the fall of the sectarian regime" instead. The first meeting was organized by activists from "*Rencontre Seculiere*" and the "Civil Society Movement".<sup>6</sup> The ASM was a civil society movement that found its support and resources in the network of civil society actors, some of which were the militant groups, associations and NGOs of the 1990s that brought with them their previous expertise and skills (Meier, 2015). The movement succeeded in mobilizing a large number of participants in its demonstrations, reaching a peak on March 20, 2011 when around 20,000 people marched from East to West Beirut, crossing the demarcation line of the civil war and calling for a secular and democratic state (Ibid).

Soon enough, however, the movement had to face internal and external challenges that proved to be difficult to overcome. On the internal level, there were two main opposing visions: the reformist line which called for reforms from within the institutions, and the revolutionary line which called for toppling the sectarian regime (Chit, 2012). In parallel with this internal tension,

<sup>4</sup> The "*Laique Pride*" was known in Arabic as *Maseerat Al 'Ilmaniyeen Nahwa Al Mowatana*.

For more information, check: <https://www.facebook.com/laiquepride/>

<sup>5</sup> The AUB Secular Club is an independent political student group created in year 2008 at the American University of Beirut (AUB) by a group of secular students who seek to create an alternative to the Lebanese sectarian politics.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Hirak Iskat Al Nizam Al Ta'ifi 2011* by Abdallah, B. (2012, February 13). Retrieved from Taysar Al Mujtama' Al Madani: <http://secularist.org/2012/02/-2011-حراك-إسقاط-النظام-الطائفي>



the sectarian system managed to hijack the movement through two strategies. First, the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) and the Amal Movement<sup>7</sup> infiltrated the ASM and tried to take control of the movement from within (Meier, 2015). Second, some members of the sectarian elite co-opted ASM demands and used them to advance their narrow sectarian political agendas (Ibid). The lack of internal cohesion within the movement and the opportunistic attitude of the sectarian/political elite towards it gradually dissipated its momentum and eventually led to its fragmentation (Meier, 2015). Nevertheless, and despite the ASM's failure to achieve any of its claims, it allowed for the later emergence of a new political consciousness and new organizations, initiatives and movements, with a better understanding of the sectarian system and its strategies of infiltration and co-optation (Chit, 2012).

"Take Back the Parliament" (*Istarji'ou Al Barلمان*) was such a political movement that gathered activists from various civil initiatives and organizations in 2012 to create an alternative anti-sectarian political campaign, outside the March 8 and March 14 political gridlock, in order to contest the 2013 parliamentary elections (Maaroufi, 2013). The campaign, however, lost momentum after the parliament extended its term in May 2013.

### **The Mobilization against Parliament Extension**

Lebanon was caught in a political gridlock after the Arab uprisings reached Syria in 2011 and Hezbollah decided to intervene militarily in support of the Syrian regime. With rising sectarian tensions and security threats, Lebanon's parliamentarians extended their mandate on two consecutive occasions in a stark breach of the constitution.

The Civil Movement for Accountability (*Al Hiraq Al Madani lil Mohasaba*) was established in 2013 to protest the parliament's first extension in 2013. The organizations and groups that joined the movement were mainly NGOs such as the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), in addition to political groups that joined forces to protest the proposed parliament extension such as the AUB Secular Club and For the Republic (*Min Ajl Al Joumhouriyah*).

The movement launched a media campaign and organized protests and sit-ins, but the extension passed anyway and elections were postponed until

November 2014. As the parliament was preparing for the second extension in November 2014, the movement organized a protest, but the numbers dropped considerably and the movement came to an end (Haidar & Majed, 2018).

### **The "You Stink" Movement**

A new cycle of civic contestation emerged in the summer of 2015. The government's failure to resolve a major garbage crisis triggered demonstrations that attracted a number of civil society organizations, student movements, and citizens from different sects, regions, classes and ages who are united under the rallying cry "You Stink" (Kassir, 2015). What started as a demonstration against the government's inefficiency in collecting garbage was soon transformed into a massive civic mobilization against the corrupt and dysfunctional sectarian system (Ibid). A resilient common narrative emerged that placed the two rival political camps under equal attack from the protest movement. In addition to established political groups, new activist groups formed on almost daily basis, bringing to light a number of demands like reclaiming public space, restoring the city center's historic popular character, holding officials accountable and suspending MPs' salaries (Rowell, 2015).

Employing the same strategies, the sectarian political elite tried to co-opt some of the organizers, adopting a reformist discourse themselves by denouncing corruption, or unleashing the security forces and their own para-legal forces against the protestors (Salloukh, 2016). The specter of potential violence, protest fatigue, and the absence of an institutional structure and a clear set of priorities among opposition groups, were the main factors that made the demonstrations lose momentum gradually and fail at achieving their demand for a sustainable and transparent waste management plan. (Rowell, 2015; Salloukh, 2016).

Despite the failure of the summer protest movement to achieve tangible results, it revitalized civil society and a number of new political groups were formed.

<sup>7</sup> Both political parties are main pillars of the sectarian system.

### 3- From Protesting to Contesting Power (2015-2018)

#### Rocking the Boat: Municipal Elections 2016 and Beirut Madinati

The political momentum of the summer protest movement and the failure of the government to address any of the country's numerous problems were critical factors that encouraged a group of politically independent and non-sectarian citizens to enter electoral politics and launch a municipal electoral campaign, Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City), in the capital Beirut.

Although it was the first time in postwar Lebanon that a politically independent, non-sectarian and non-partisan campaign emerges from within civil society to contest the sectarian/political elite through local elections, the cofounders and the core group members of Beirut Madinati were not newcomers to politics. There was an evident line of continuity that could be traced back to the various postwar civil society movements, political groups, campaigns and initiatives. Among the core group members of Beirut Madinati were political activists who led or participated in the student movements against the Syrian tutelage; the civil rights activists who campaigned for the right to civil marriage, removing sectarian affiliation from civil registry records, as well as for equal citizenship rights for women and electoral reform; and the architects, urban planners and activists who resisted the reconstruction of downtown Beirut and the privatization of public space, and who campaigned for protecting the city's urban memory and heritage, as well as for the improvement of the overall livability of the city (Haidar, 2017).

It was this coalition between activists, urbanists and professionals, who had accumulated political and technical experience over the years, that created the backbone of Beirut Madinati.

The campaign presented itself as a serious opportunity for change, adopting a positive and proactive political discourse that was based on providing credible and achievable alternatives anchored in an electoral program. Instead of the usual reactionary

and denunciatory discourse of the opposition against the sectarian system, attacking it and associating negative emotions with its symbols, Beirut Madinati's positive communication strategy focused on its team's competencies and leadership abilities. Through its media appearances, press statements, open houses and neighborhoods' meetings, Beirut Madinati's rhetoric redefined a political landscape, usually equated with sectarianism and corruption, in a way that reflects the primacy of the public good, social justice, transparency, accountability and citizen empowerment (Ibid).

The campaign built its grassroots base through reaching out to a wide-ranging segment of the city's population and recruiting a large body of local volunteers. To that end, the campaign relied on both conventional and innovative electoral politics. Volunteers were recruited during kick-off rallies, open-house meetings, neighborhood debates, and fundraising and public events. Moreover, the campaign used digital media tools to recruit volunteers, who could sign up using a mobile phone application or via the campaign's website.

Among the volunteers of Beirut Madinati were the activists of many civil society campaigns and movements. Activists from political groups that were established during the summer protest movement such as You Stink, For the Republic (*Min Ajl Al Jumhuriyya*) and People Want (*Al Sha'b Yourid*), along with activists from other campaigns and NGOs such as *Tayyar Al Moujtama'Al Madani*, *Haqqi Alayyeh* and The Civil Campaign to Protect Dalieh, set their differences aside and joined hands under Beirut Madinati's banner.

Another notable achievement for Beirut Madinati was its ability to recruit volunteers who were first-time political activists. Developing a political narrative outside the March 14 and March 8 binaries, that reclaims people's right to the city, made many volunteers who were apolitical participate for the first time in an electoral campaign contesting the establishment (Haidar, 2017).

The campaign had its shortcomings too. Beirut Madinati walked a tightrope when it came to the city's contentious political topics. It avoided tackling one of the capital's most controversial topics, namely Solidere.<sup>8</sup> There was

<sup>8</sup> Solidere is the French acronym of *Societe Libanaise pour le Developpement et la Reconstrucion de Beyrouth*. It is a private company that steered the postwar reconstruction plan of Beirut city center.

no clear position vis-à-vis the postwar reconstruction plan which shaped the political economy of the postwar system, particularly as Solidere, the company that managed the reconstruction, still holds a regulatory authority over the city center. In addition, the campaign had no clear strategy on how to deal with the massive illegal violations from developers on Beirut's coast line. As for urban safety and security, the campaign did not mention anything related to the paramilitary group Hezbollah which is among the major threats to the people's security in some of Beirut's neighborhoods. While this pragmatic approach may have helped the campaign electorally by avoiding antagonizing any political or sectarian segment of the society, it was at the cost of political and ideological clarity.

In fact, the campaign was criticized for avoiding the topics that are central to the economic and political underpinnings of Lebanon's postwar sectarian system. Nonetheless, its focus on proposing solutions that are feasible and that fall directly under the prerogatives of the municipality appealed to a large segment of the society. This strategy made the campaign succeed in overcoming the "common boredom" with politics, as Samer Franjeh coined it (Franjeh, 2016), and engage otherwise politically alienated citizens.

### The Sectarian System Fights Back

Co-optation of political opposition is a common strategy that the sectarian/political elite employ when faced with a potential threat emerging from within civil society (Clark & Salloukh, 2013). At first, the Beirut Madinati campaign was not taken seriously, and its members were portrayed as political amateurs lacking electoral experience and the financial and human resources that would enable them to challenge long-established political parties. As the campaign progressively grounded itself locally and expanded its popular base, however, attempts to co-opt the campaign and avoid a political battle have taken place. In a meeting with one of the leading establishment political parties, Beirut Madinati was offered two to three seats on the opposing list, in return for withdrawing from the electoral contest (Haidar, 2017). Disseminating rumors was another strategy that was

used against Beirut Madinati to tarnish its image as an independent electoral campaign, which is unaffiliated with either the 8 or 14 March political camps. In the run up to the elections, the campaign was targeted by a number of damaging, though often contradictory, political rumors.<sup>9</sup> Another attempt to jeopardize the campaign's reputation was using its cross-sectarian and secular identity as a weapon against it. The campaign and its candidates were portrayed as an atheist group against religion, and against conservative social norms (Ibid).

Another tactic employed by the sectarian system was a communication strategy based on provincializing Beirut. On April 26, 2016, four days after Beirut Madinati announced its list of candidates, the Future Movement backed list - bringing together candidates from both the 8 and 14 March camps - was announced (The Daily Star, 2016). The list was dubbed "the Beirutis' list" (*La'ihat Al Byetreh*) and its slogan was "So that Beirut remains for its people" (*Litabqa Beirut Li Ahliha*). The slogan stirred controversy and was considered exclusionary for the residents of Beirut who live, work and pay their taxes in Beirut but are not deemed "Beirutis", and are not entitled to vote because of the archaic civil registry law which cuts the link between place of residency and the right to elect local representatives.<sup>10</sup> It was also alienating to other Lebanese citizens to describe Beirut, the capital of the country and the symbol of its unity and coexistence, in parochial terms invoking primordial considerations for electoral purposes.

Unlike many other municipalities in the country where the different sectarian political parties competed against each other in opposing lists, the sectarian parties, with the exception of Hezbollah, placed all their political animosities aside and allied in one list that best represented the logic of dividing the "spoils" of public office to equal shares among the different sects. This meant that Beirut Madinati, the nascent campaign, competed alone against the establishment coalition under a majoritarian electoral law which is designed to produce and reproduce the same sectarian elite, rid elections of its uncertainty, and make competition almost impossible.

<sup>9</sup> Few days before the elections, false news was spread that Hezbollah issued a Taklif Shar'i (a religious order) for its Shia supporters to vote for Beirut Madinati. One day before the elections, a rumor was sent massively as a text message via mobile phones to Beirut voters, claiming that after a trilateral meeting between the head of Hezbollah's internal security chief Wafiq Safa, the former head of Lebanon's General Security Directorate Jameel El Sayyid, and the former head of the Lebanese Presidential Guard General Mustapha Hamdan, the three agreed to secure a Beirut Madinati win in order to end Saad Hariri politically. Ironically, only a couple of days before this rumor was circulated, Hamdan had accused Beirut Madinati of being corrupt and funded by foreign embassies (Haidar, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Lebanese citizens vote in their ancestral villages instead of their place of residency where they pay their municipal taxes and are mostly affected by the work of the municipality.

Despite all the political and institutional challenges, Beirut Madintai garnered an impressive 32% of the city vote and achieved an unprecedented symbolic victory for an independent and cross-sectarian political group, challenging the sectarian system in the capital Beirut.<sup>11</sup> Beirut Madinatni campaign represented a major shift in civil society's approach to politics since it moved from protesting to contesting power, offering itself as a realistic alternative that is anchored in a positive communication strategy.

The volunteer-led campaign changed the electoral scene in the capital city, revitalizing elections and endowing Lebanese politics with a new meaning whereby it becomes at the service of the people and not the political elite and their clientilistic networks. Launching an electoral municipal campaign in the capital of Lebanon made Beirut Madinatni lead a national political battle rather than a local one that is limited to the city. It also inspired other battles: soon after the campaign was launched in March, several independent electoral campaigns emerged in different Lebanese cities.

Among the most significant implications of the 2016 municipal elections was the emergence of a nationwide political narrative outside the March 8 and March 14 political polarization that had been paralyzing the country since 2005. In Beirut and in many other cities and villages, emerging political groups contested the municipal elections with a new political rhetoric. Central to this rhetoric was everyday politics that mattered to all citizens such as employment, social security, education, better public services, sufficient and well-built infrastructure, and a clean environment.

### **An Uphill Battle: Parliamentary Elections 2018**

In June 2017, a new electoral law was adopted by the Lebanese Parliament. Although the new electoral law was based on proportional representation, the way that the electoral districts were crafted, the

preferential vote and the sectarian allocation of seats were mainly intended to reproduce the majoritarian sectarian system (Atallah & El-Helou, 2017).

In January 2018, and following the electoral activism that Beirut Madinatni unleashed, a group of 11 political groups from civil society joined forces in a political alliance named the "Watani Alliance" to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections in May 2018, to be held for the first time in nine years.<sup>12</sup> The alliance presented itself as an alternative to the current political elite with a unified electoral program that is anchored in the principles of democracy and justice, and as an open alliance of groups that agreed on a common political vision, on a candidates' vetting process and on a code of conduct. To overcome political differences between different groups and enable more groups to join, they avoided, however, tackling controversial and divisive political topics such as the position vis-a-vis Hezbollah and its weapons.

The alliance members identified themselves as the civil society groups who started mobilizing in the anti-sectarian movement in 2011, continued their contestation against the political establishment during the waste management crisis in 2015, and pursued their opposition by protesting the extension of the parliament, taxation laws and the government's corruption.<sup>13</sup>

The "Watani Alliance" formed lists in nine out of the 15 electoral districts, with 66 candidates, 30% of whom were women.<sup>14</sup> Not all civil society electoral campaigns, however, joined this alliance. "Kulluna Beirut", an independent electoral campaign in Beirut II district, refused to join on the grounds that the alliance lacked political clarity on the position from Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, and that some of its candidates were partisan or had ties with the sectarian system.<sup>15</sup>

Civil society campaigns employed similar campaigning

<sup>11</sup> The establishment list, the Beirutis' list, garnered 46% of the votes with an average of 43,227 votes. Beirut Madinatni's list obtained 32% of the votes with an average of 30,059 votes. The three other lists, Citizens in a State list, Beirut list and the Beirut list obtained 5%, 2% and 1% of the votes, respectively (Haidar, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Nada Ayoub, "الحراك المدني" من تحركات الشارع إلى الانتخابات... ماذا في جعبة "وطني"؟, Annahar, 19 January 2018, <https://www.annahar.com/article/737110-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%87> [accessed on January 31, 2018]

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Check: <https://www.facebook.com/Ta7alofWatani/>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Mneimneh, a candidate from Kulluna Beirut, Beirut, 27 May 2019.

tools and tactics. They held open house meetings and organized public events, in addition to door-to-door campaigning. They relied heavily on social media platforms to advertise for their candidates and disseminate their electoral program, particularly given that they lacked the funds to secure the expensive air-time on local TV channels.

The electoral programs of civil society campaigns reflected the political narrative that emerged following Beirut Madinati's electoral campaign, focusing on the primacy of the public good, social justice and equality, transparency and accountability, and citizen empowerment. Notably, and instead of focusing on the political divisions between the establishment's political parties, the sectarian elite co-opted civil society's anti-corruption narrative, and campaigned for protecting citizens' socio-economic rights and improving public services provision through fighting corruption.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the results of the parliamentary elections were quite disappointing for civil society candidates, whose share of the national vote stood at around 4%.<sup>17</sup> "Watani Alliance" managed to win only one seat in Beirut I for the Sabaa party candidate, Paula Yaacoubian.<sup>18</sup> The low threshold in this district secured the alliance with a seat. The failure of civil society groups to sway public opinion in their favor raises key questions about their readiness to enter electoral politics.

Although the "Watani Alliance" succeeded in uniting many of the civil society's political groups in a broad-based alliance, this unity came at the expense of having a clear political identity and political vision (El Kak, 2019), with candidates from the opposing ends of the political spectrum.<sup>19</sup> The lack of a clear and common political framework made the voters doubt the ability of civil society's candidates to break with the sectarian system.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite long years of political mobilization organized by civil society actors in postwar Lebanon, challenging the sectarian system's hegemony has proved to be an extremely difficult task. The current political model with its centralized government and unfair electoral system is designed to sustain the dominance of the sectarian/political elite and to prohibit the emergence of new political contenders.

The electoral system is a key institutional tool that was instrumentalized by the sectarian/political elite to control parliamentary and municipal elections, and restrict citizens' electoral and political choices. Institutional reforms are needed to transform Lebanon's corporate power-sharing arrangement into a more representative, accountable and stable political model. Adopting a fairer and more democratic electoral system can ameliorate the discriminatory and exclusionary nature of the sectarian system, by opening it up to cross-sectarian or non-sectarian political groups.

However, it comes as no surprise that the custodians and main beneficiaries of this regime have no interest to advance these reforms, and will certainly resist any attempts at doing so. Breaking the current immobilism requires civil society's counter-hegemonic political groups and parties, syndicates, student bodies, academics, activists, artists and intellectuals to continue their protracted battle in their different domains and in their everyday practices. Most importantly, political and social change requires building sustainable political movements and parties, with a popular base, that do not shy away from addressing upfront the country's contentious politics and that view elections as an opportunity and not an end in itself.

<sup>16</sup> Check: <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/335344/nna-leb.gov.lb/en> , and <http://www.almanar.com.lb/3542383>

<sup>17</sup> Check LCPS report: [http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1553851924-parliamentary\\_election\\_1\\_eng.pdf](http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/publications/1553851924-parliamentary_election_1_eng.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Paula Yaacoubian was a host on the Lebanese broadcast channel, the Future TV, a channel affiliated with the Future Movement. Ahead of May 2018 parliamentary elections she resigned from her post and joined the Sabaa Party. In March 2019, Sabaa Party expelled her from its ranks claiming that she was not abiding the party's agenda and failing to criticize all political elites equally. For more information, check:

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Mar-20/479258-civil-society-alliance-suspends-sabaa-partys-membership.ashx>

<sup>19</sup> The electoral program of the Sabaa Party, a member of the "Watani Alliance", which is anchored in the privatization of the public sector is in contradiction with the programs of many other civil society political groups (Nour, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Arab reform Initiative, "New Political Pressure Groups in Lebanon and the May 2018 Elections: Lessons Learned for Future Engagement", 27 October 2018, <https://www.arab-reform.net/event/lebanese-youth-activists-and-the-may-2018-elections-lessons-learned-for-future-engagement/> [accessed on 10 April 2019]



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# The Rise and Consolidation of Urban Rights Activism in Beirut

*Mona Harb<sup>1</sup>*

## *Introduction*

Lebanon is rather well known for its active civil society organizations that engage significantly in social affairs, and fill the void produced by ineffective and absent public institutions (Karam 2006; Kingston 2013). Until the phenomenon of Beirut Madinati's municipal campaign of 2016, it was much less known for its urban activism. In this paper, I tell the story of urban activism as deployed in Beirut since the early 1990s, by framing our account in relation to policy context, actors, frames and strategies of action.<sup>2</sup> I focus on the organizing efforts of urban activists in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, and how these efforts consolidated with the municipal campaign of Beirut Madinati, ten years later. Data collection and analysis stem from the author's experience as an urban dweller, urban researcher and part-time activist. It is based on conversations with dozens of urban activists and on participant observation, as well as on a review of social media entries and online material.

The paper is organized in two parts: in the first, I discuss the context of urban policies and governance in Beirut, and how it has generated a dismal state of public services. In the second part, I examine the conditions that have led to the creation of Beirut Madinati. First, I discuss the legacy of a first generation of urban activists and scholars, which laid the foundation of a critical urban discourse that was further advanced by the establishment of new urban studies programmes in universities. This led to the formation of a second generation of urban activists who are eager to preserve the liveability of the city and its shared spaces... Second, I discuss the growth of a diverse set of coalitions and campaigns that place urban issues at the centre of their claims, and focus on three success stories that demonstrate the formation of new modes of collective action and mobilization: Nahnoo and the re-opening of Horch Beirut, the Dalieh Campaign and the protection

of the coastal commons, and the successful campaign which stopped the Fouad Boutros Highway. Third, I examine how the hegemony of sectarian politics led to the collapse of public services, which was epitomized by the acute garbage crisis of August 2015 that prompted the widespread mobilization of independent activist groups in the capital city (al-Hirak), leading up to the establishment of Beirut Madinati which received one-third of the votes of the city against the sectarian political elite who won the elections by a margin of 11%. The paper closes with concluding remarks regarding the challenges of urban rights activism in the context of a hybrid political order where the commons are not protected by the state.

## *1. Urban Policies and Governance in Lebanon: Dismal Public Services and Infrastructure*

Planning in Lebanon is operated via top-down policies that are decided by a few in a small number of public institutions that operate without consultation with the population. The Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), established in 1977 to replace the Ministry of Planning, is a public agency that reports directly to the council of ministers, and that today centralizes all international grants and loans. It mainly decides on and manages infrastructural projects across Lebanon, ensuring their execution through subcontracting. The Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU) is part of the Ministry of Public Works, and suffers from major limitations with regard to human and financial resources, rendering it an obsolete institution which is notorious for its corruption and inefficiency, as well as its incapacity. Its main function is approving master plans that are conceived according to obsolete physical planning guidelines and building permits. Thus, no central institution is effectively conceiving

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of this paper were written for the Power2Youth project where I lead the Lebanon study on youth mobilization. They are published in this working paper: Harb, M. 2016, *Cities and Political Change: How Urban Activists in Beirut Bred an Urban Social Movement*. Rome: IAI, Power2Youth papers, no.20.



and implementing spatial planning policies across the Lebanese territory. The CDR issued a National Physical Master Plan in 2009, which serves as a broad reference for spatial planning and regional development experts and planners, but lacks clear implementation mechanisms at regional and local scales.<sup>3</sup>

Local and regional governments have large margins of manoeuvre when it comes to spatial planning, but weak resources (Harb and Atallah 2015).<sup>4</sup> Only large and medium municipalities and municipal federations are able to perform well in terms of service provision. Municipalities are directly elected in Lebanon, and attract a relatively large percentage of the population to the ballot boxes. The first post-war elections took place in 1998, and have been occurring every six years. The number of municipalities and municipal federations has been increasing, reaching about 1,000 municipalities and 50 municipal federations that group two-thirds of them. Some local and regional governments, especially in medium-sized towns, have been developing creative interventions on the spatial planning level that are inclusive of youth (such as Jezzine, Ghobeyri, Baakline, Dinniyye and Aley). Their mayors are engaging youth in decision-making through establishing committees on specific tasks, encouraging them to become more involved in local politics and development. This practice is worth observing as municipalities could be interesting levers of political and social change, and are more accessible to youth than national-level politics, although central-level policies do keep constraining the margins of manoeuvre of local and regional governments.

This centralized, fragmented and inefficient urban governance structure in Lebanon leads unsurprisingly to dysfunctional urban policies that have dire impacts on young people's inclusion in the city. In what follows, I discuss three sets of urban policies that have significant impacts on the livelihood of youth: affordable housing and basic service provision, mobility patterns and public space. I demonstrate how each sector is operating in ways that marginalize young people from their

neighbourhoods, as well as how they dematerialize and depoliticize youth's relationship to the city.

### **Affordable Housing and Basic Service Provision**

There is no public or affordable housing in Lebanon. Some failed attempts were tried in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>5</sup> The Public Corporation for Housing (PCH) provides loans for middle-income families who can demonstrate their bankability. Private real-estate developers and contractors provide housing to people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, according to a caricatured geographic gradient: providing housing for the rich in the capital city and its relatively near peripheries, and for the poor in its distant peripheries and towns. A lot of poor people do inhabit several neighbourhoods in the central city and its suburbs, namely dwellers in informal settlements and refugee camps. These amount to more than 20% of municipal Beirut according to 2003 estimates (Fawaz and Peillen 2003: 29) - a proportion that has certainly increased significantly today with the influx of Syrian refugees. They live in grim, insecure, crowded and unhygienic conditions, with limited access to basic services and public space.

The cost of 1 sq.m in municipal Beirut averages \$4,500<sup>6</sup>—a figure that is unaffordable for most, given that the minimum monthly wage is \$450. Rent is also very pricey, averaging \$1,200/month for a one-bedroom apartment, which only the well-heeled can afford.<sup>7</sup> There is no rent-control policy in Lebanon, and the few subsidized apartments in Beirut, Tripoli and Saida are now progressively going to be phased out because of the new rent law that has abolished rent-controlled apartments.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, access to basic services such as electricity, water and internet are not effectively secured through public means. Public electricity is not provided 24/7, and electricity cuts can reach up to 8–10 hours per day in some areas. Water (for home use and potable) is also not available on a daily basis, especially after the 2013-14 draught. Internet speed is notorious for

<sup>3</sup> The Plan can be accessed at <http://www.cdr.gov.lb/study/sdatl/sdatle.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> The next paragraph builds on our work in Harb and Atallah (2015), which provides more details on municipal governance, and local and regional spatial planning initiatives.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on affordable housing in Lebanon, see Mona Fawaz and Maysa Sabah (2015), "Charting a Path. Opening the Path to Affordable Middle Income Housing", in *Executive*, 18 June, <http://www.executive-magazine.com/opinion/comment/charting-a-path>

<sup>6</sup> The Lebanese pound is the official currency in Lebanon but the economy has been dollarized since the civil war. The paper uses US dollars as a monetary unit.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers are taken from Numbeo ([http://www.numbeo.com/property-investment/city\\_result.jsp?country=Lebanon&city=Beirut](http://www.numbeo.com/property-investment/city_result.jsp?country=Lebanon&city=Beirut)) and are based on 2013 CIA Factbook estimates.

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Marot (2014), "The End of Rent Control in Lebanon: Another Boost to the 'Growth Machine'?", in *Jadaliyya*, 12 June, [http://egypt.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18093/the-end-of-rent-control-in-lebanon\\_another-boost-t](http://egypt.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18093/the-end-of-rent-control-in-lebanon_another-boost-t)

being very slow in Lebanon. The recent garbage crisis in the country also reveals the absolute failure of the Lebanese government in securing basic service management of the waste sector. All these poor public services lead to the proliferation and fragmentation of service provision by an unregulated private sector that is often closely connected to sectarian political parties benefiting financially from their monopoly over the provided service, and from their ability to impose it on the neighbourhood by force (Verdeil 2013). Private providers of electricity, bottled water and internet sell their services to people at exorbitant fees, and at unmonitored and poor quality levels. Some people elaborate their own alternative forms of accessing service at cheaper prices: some drive up to the river source to fill their water bottles, others install a battery-operated electric system, and still others free-ride the neighbour's Wi-Fi system. However, overall, people are captive to the private providers' system of service distribution, and have limited alternative options.

### Mobility

In terms of spatial mobility, Lebanon has no effective shared transportation system. The few buses that operate in the main cities of the Beirut agglomeration are in poor condition, and do not follow an effective time schedule. Less than 20% of people resort to some form of shared transportation.<sup>9</sup> Many appreciate *vans* (small buses that can carry twelve to fifteen people) for connections between neighbourhoods, towns and cities - a system that is more reliable, faster and affordable. The operators of these vehicles are closely affiliated to political elites who benefit financially from their returns, and who legitimize their existence. A good example of an effective van line, appreciated by youth, is van no. 4, which connects Hayy el-Sellom in south Beirut to Hamra in central Beirut.<sup>10</sup> People also resort to *services* (jitneys, or taxi-services, a taxi that operates along main routes and picks up several passengers) for moving inside the city itself, though their costs are higher than vans, as they pay licensing and registration fees. Mostly, people move around using private cars and motorcycles, accessible to

some through a relatively affordable second-hand car dealing service, as well as facilitated credit payments by private banks.

As for walkability, Beirut's agglomeration is less and less walkable. Municipal Beirut's neighbourhoods are much more accessible for pedestrians than the new hilly suburbs that are conceived to be navigated by vehicles. Even within municipal Beirut, walking is not a preferred mode of transportation as sidewalks and pedestrian crossings are not safe, not shaded and not smoothly connected into a walkable network (such as Ramlet el-Beida and Jnah). Moving in a vehicle is also strongly associated with a higher social status, while walking is associated with lower class practices (Monroe 2011). Some neighbourhoods in the city are more walkable than others, such as Ras Beirut where students, dwellers, expats and tourists flock the streets, and areas where the urban fabric is close-knit and street life is vibrant (Mar Mikhail, Gemmayezeh, Tariq al-Jdideh, Zokak al-Blatt, and Mar Elias). The municipality of Beirut has commissioned an urban study for developing soft mobility patterns throughout Beirut (*Liaison Douce*), which has been completed and has been awaiting the approval of the municipal council and governor for implementation, for several years now.

Physical access is not the sole factor affecting spatial mobility in the cities of Lebanon. Sectarian politics and moral norms are also factors that impact youth's choices for navigating the city, as shown in our study of moral leisure sites across Beirut and its southern section (Deeb and Harb 2013). People choose to go to places where they feel safe and comfortable, among their own, in terms of norms and values. Piety, gender and class, as well as life experiences and personal mood, all come together when they make their choice. Levels of sectarian political tension also factor into such decisions. Generally, people avoid going to territories affiliated with the "other" political group in times of heightened sectarian tension. However, the spatial features of the site itself can trump all these considerations: the public beach, the seaside corniche, the park or the river, all attract for their environmental

<sup>9</sup> Amer Mohtar and Petra Samaha (2016), "Decoding an Urban Myth: An Inquiry into the Socio-Economics of Van Number 4 in Beirut", in *Jadaliyya*, 7 January, [http://cci.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23511/decoding-an-urban-myth\\_an-inquiry-into-the-socio-e](http://cci.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23511/decoding-an-urban-myth_an-inquiry-into-the-socio-e)

<sup>10</sup> I know of van number 4 through AUB students who use it to come to university, and who praise its drivers, their driving know-how through busy traffic, its safety and its affordability. Actually, van no. 4 has many fans, and its own Facebook face (<https://www.facebook.com/van4.lb?fref=ts%255C>), liked by 10,000 people, where one can read users' anecdotes, jokes and comments. For a detailed account of its operations see Amer Mohtar and Petra Samaha (2016), "Decoding an Urban Myth: An Inquiry into the Socio-Economics of Van Number 4 in Beirut", in *Jadaliyya*, 7 January, [http://cci.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23511/decoding-an-urban-myth\\_an-inquiry-into-the-socio-e](http://cci.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23511/decoding-an-urban-myth_an-inquiry-into-the-socio-e)

qualities, their openness and their association with the comfort of being outdoors and in nature.

Thus, a variety of material and symbolic elements simultaneously facilitate and complicate people's mobility in Lebanese cities and neighbourhoods. People negotiate their movement in the city and their navigation of its spaces and places, according to sectarian politics, social and religious norms and values, spatial features, as well as gender and class.

### Access to Public Spaces

Lebanese cities have very few public spaces, in terms of parks and gardens. Public life often happens in the streets. The lively streets of the city are strongly patronized by the working class, incorporating a dominance of young males. Representations stigmatize these places, as groups who dwell in them are said to be prone to substance abuse, harassment and unruly behaviour. Urban policies in the post-war period have not privileged public spaces of encounter, and have instead invested in infrastructural equipment and in building highways that have led to the consolidation of an urban lifestyle away from public street life. People live in their homes outside of the city, commute back and forth to work, and spend their free time in secure private environments such as resorts, clubs, shopping centres and malls - a trend similar to many other cities in the South-East Mediterranean and beyond, dominated by neoliberal urban policies and privatization strategies.

Public parks and gardens have not been a priority of local urban policies. Only recently, in Beirut, did the municipality take up a private sector grant to refurbish one of its public gardens (Sanayeh), although this one was already in a relatively decent shape and the funds could have been used to rehabilitate other public gardens which were in much worse shape. The municipality also timidly endorsed an NGO project to establish public libraries across Lebanese cities (as-Sabil), but without granting them the needed human and financial resources that its coffers hold. Additionally, the Beirut municipality did not prioritize the opening of the largest park in the capital city (Horch Beirut), for what seem to be sectarian political reasons concerning its proximity to the Shiite Dahiya. Only in 2015 did the governor agree to open the park on Saturdays, after the relentless lobbying of the NGO Nahnoo, which I discuss further below. The municipality also did not do anything to

protect the coastal areas of Ramlet el-Beida and Dalieh al-Raoucheh, the last remaining freely accessed seaside open spaces of municipal Beirut, which are under threat of private real-estate development. In addition, the municipality is earmarking its public lands for parking buildings, thus prioritizing again private vehicle users over those who use the public realm.

City dwellers therefore have very few freely accessible open spaces that they can go to, hang out in, socialize and interact within. Those who can afford it, go to private clubs and resorts to play sports and hang out, and to expensive shopping malls to consume and spend their free time. Those who cannot, go to the few public spaces available: in Beirut, that would be the seaside corniche, the public beach and the few parks. Young men also patronize street corners, monitoring the neighbourhood, smoking arguileh, playing cards and checking out the passers-by. Cafes and restaurants have become important destinations, especially for youth who spend a lot of time there away from their parents' scrutiny, studying, hanging out, meeting, interacting, flirting, smoking arguileh and playing backgammon or cards (Deeb and Harb 2013). Shopping malls also attract patrons, even those with lesser financial means, who come to use their large alleys to roam around, exhibit their bodies and gaze at each other.<sup>11</sup> They often do not consume goods inside the mall, leaving it for a nearby sandwich shop to purchase cheaper food and drink, and then returning to continue their procession.

In sum, the majority of urban dwellers in Lebanon are denied affordable housing and basic services, sustainable mobility patterns and access to public space. There is no public actor, at the central or local scale, championing any of these causes. This significantly limits liveability prospects and opportunities for a secure life. Municipalities and municipal federations could play an active and effective role to change these prospects, but very few are mobilizing to do so. Indeed, municipalities can champion community centres, within which youth groups can play a key role; they can also engage people in municipal committees, and encourage them to participate in local affairs; and they can find opportunities, via the private sector, to encourage entrepreneurship and promote job opportunities.

In what follows, I focus on how, over the past decade,

<sup>11</sup> Some shopping malls such as City Centre, City Mall and Le Mall attract a more working-class clientele, a fact that is well known to higher-income youth who avoid these spaces and restrict their outings to more exclusive malls such as ABC.

these unjust and skewed urban policies have led to social and political mobilization among urban activists who are holding public authorities accountable for providing them with a more liveable city. These urban activists are participating in protests, campaigns, NGOs and coalitions, leading up to the consolidation of an urban rights movement.

## 2. Struggles towards Consolidating Urban Rights Activism

How, in a polarized and contested city like Beirut, where dwellers have been steadily excluded from urban services and public spaces, was an urban rights movement progressively formed over the last decade; and how did it crystallize in a municipal campaign named "Beirut Madinati" (Beirut, My City) which garnered 37% of the total number of votes in the May 2016 municipal elections?

### Two Generations of Urban Activists

During the civil war, in moments of relative peace, public agents elaborated reconstruction and development plans for Beirut's city centre (1977) and for Greater Beirut (Region Metropolitaine de Beyrouth, 1986). Several of the urban planners who worked on those projects believed in a practice of urban planning which serves the collective good. Their plans did not materialize, but they remained involved in the city's affairs. After the end of the civil war in 1990, talks about the reconstruction of Beirut's city centre started intensifying. In 1991, under the auspices of the multibillionaire businessman Rafic Hariri who would be voted prime minister a year later, the parliament voted for a special law allowing the creation of a real-estate company in the city centre with exceptional competencies: Solidere. Solidere brought in urban planners who made extravagant planning proposals for the city centre, which erased most of its urban fabric and altered the scale of its squares and neighbourhoods, transforming the city centre into a new capital that is supposed to operate at a global level. We were far from the practice of urban planning that

serves a collective good. The practice was emblematic of a neoliberal approach to urbanism that swept the Arab region (and beyond), and that has been well analyzed in the literature (Fawaz 2009, Bogaert 2012). Several urban planners and urban scholars mobilized against Solidere. They spoke in conferences, and wrote books or essays in newspapers, arguing against its neoliberal approach to rebuilding the city and calling on public agents to preserve the public interest through devising urban policies that protect the public realm, improve mobility, and keep the city liveable and inclusive. They organized and protested, to no avail. What remains of their struggles is a sizable body of knowledge on critical urban practice,<sup>12</sup> which engaged many urban scholars at the time, and continues to inspire many students of urban planning and design. They kept working with public agencies and professional bodies, in a constant effort to improve the practice of urban planning so that it leads to better urban spaces in cities. One of their noteworthy initiatives was their struggle to preserve the urban heritage of Beirut, which also did not yield any positive outcomes. Here again, one of their major contributions was how they influenced a younger generation of urban practitioners and scholars who worked with them, listened to their talks and debates, and/or read their work.

In 1995, two years after my graduation as an architect from the American University of Beirut (AUB), the first graduate programme in Urbanism opened in Beirut, at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA). I was among the first batch of graduates with a masters' degree in Urbanism in 1996. After my graduation, I enrolled in a PhD programme in Political Science in France, and got a research job at the ex-CERMOC (now IFPO) of Beirut, as part of its urban laboratory.<sup>13</sup> A few years later, in 1998, AUB opened its graduate programme in Urban Planning and Design, at the department of Architecture and Design. I started teaching there part-time, alongside my colleague Mona Fawaz who was finalizing her PhD in Urban Planning at MIT. We both finished our PhDs and joined the programme as full-time faculty in the early 2000s. Simultaneously, the Lebanese University (LU)

<sup>12</sup> This group of practitioners and scholars published four books with Dar al-Jadid: Assem Salam wrote on urban heritage and planning, Nabil Beyhum on the urban sociology of Beirut, George Corm on the economics of the city and Jad Tabet on its urbanism.

<sup>13</sup> IFPO's urban lab was led by an urban historian (Jean-Luc Arnaud) who taught urbanism at ALBA, and established a network of graduate and post-graduate students working on urban issues. He organized regular debates with established local and international urban scholars, and established a newsletter which helped train these scholars in writing and publication. He also supported several of these students by providing them with funding, or introducing them to funding opportunities. These were the times when the French research centres established abroad were still well-financed. The urban lab was then led by three other French scholars who also helped consolidate this transition, although resources progressively became much scarcer. The urban lab was then eliminated because of lack of funding.

established a master programme in Urbanism. Along the way, other universities joined them: Notre Dame University and Beirut Arab University. Most of these university programmes had a strong grounding in social sciences, teaching students urban and planning theory courses, in addition to professional and technical tools. A few of them (LU and ALBA) had agreements with French universities that allowed French professors to come and teach, bringing with them their scholarship, expertise and networks.

The critical urban discourse that had emerged with the first generation of urban activists started consolidating across most Lebanese universities - public and private. Graduate and undergraduate students acquired a substantive understanding of topics such as informality, housing, service provision, public space, urban governance, etc., and a grounded approach to urban research, incorporating fieldwork, ethnography and mapping. Scholars and experts got invited to give lectures and workshops and conferences were organized, delving in-depth into specific issues. One of these conferences at AUB (City Debates) became a landmark yearly event, attracting international urban scholars. More and more students became interested in urban studies and planning, some pursuing a graduate career in Lebanon and others opting to enrol in graduate programmes abroad. A new generation of young urbanists was forming. Many of them were interested in professional practice, and joined big consulting firms in Lebanon and the Arab world.<sup>14</sup> Others were interested in consulting and/or teaching. Among the latter group, especially, many were increasingly conscious of their roles as reflective practitioners who are able to intervene on cities, make modes of spatial production more liveable in ways that would make urban spaces operate in resonance with ordinary people's daily needs, and thus make such spaces more actively used, experienced and owned.

Lebanon is also a place where opportunities for urban activism abound. As mentioned earlier, in a context of heightened neoliberal urbanism, urban policies and interventions are elaborated to service the rich, at the expense of the public. In our classrooms, we often discuss situations and cases where this is clearly demonstrated,

and we expose our students to the range of possible alternative interventions, highlighting goals of social justice, inclusion, equity and sustainability. We invite and engage with established urban professionals who are trying to incorporate such alternative approaches in their work. We also encourage our students to intern or work in their offices. Whenever we are solicited to contribute to an urban project or consultancy, we do so according to those principles. As such, many members of this second generation of urbanists are trained in the principles of critical urban studies.

Lebanon is also a country where wars and crises regularly occur. In 2006, the Israeli war on Lebanon destroyed infrastructure and hundreds of dwellings in south Beirut, and across the south of Lebanon. At AUB, we formed a reconstruction unit, and recruited many graduates who volunteered with us to contribute to the reconstruction process. This engagement was the first instance when we were able to apply our urban principles on such a scale. We contributed to planning neighbourhoods, and we used participatory action research. Our initiatives are documented in a volume edited by our colleague, Howayda Al-Harithy (2010). This experience was critical for the young students who were working with us, as it allowed them to build their own approach to urban interventions, thus to become more autonomous. Several of them maintained a strong propensity for urban activism, while pursuing their careers. One of them, Rabih Shibli, went on to become a key actor in establishing AUB's Civic Centre for Engagement and Community Service (CCECS), which he now directs. Another, Ismail Sheikh Hassan, was instrumental in the community-based action research that led to the development of the reconstruction plan for the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, which the Lebanese Army razed to the ground in 2009. He is now co-leading another urban initiative in Saida, Lil Madina. Two others, Abir Saksouk-Sasso and Nadine Bekdache, became active in many urban activism initiatives, separately and collectively. Saksouk-Sasso, in conjunction with other artists, established Dictaphone - a collective that produces performances related to public space in Lebanon. Bekdache led the Coalition for the Right to Housing in Lebanon. Together, they established Public Works, an increasingly impactful

<sup>14</sup> The Lebanese-based town planning department at Dar al-Handasah (Shair and partners), one of the leading consulting firms in the world, is composed of AUB graduates in urban design and is led by one. Khatib and Alami, another leading regional consulting firm, also incorporates many AUB urban graduates. A few AUB graduates have joined ministries of planning and consulting firms in GCC countries. For more on the education of planners in Lebanon, see Verdeil 2008

platform that promotes urban research and mapping tools. They were also active members of the Dalieh coalition, promoting the preservation of the Dalieh coastal site of Beirut.

All these people, and the extended network of their colleagues, are the leading members making up the new generation of urban activists in Beirut today. They are in regular conversation with urban scholars and practitioners who taught them at university, and whom they consult and engage with at their meetings and events. They are also connected to other urban activists, some of whom were trained abroad and came back to Beirut to apply their knowledge to a city that they are fond of, and that they seek to improve and make their own. They are also related to other networks of activists, trained in development and social work, who are also keen on advocating environmental and social development issues, such as Greenline and Nahnoo.

In addition, this generation is well aware of urban rights movements that are multiplying across the world. It is led by the same urge to reclaim cities and urban spaces, and is keen on participating in their processes of spatial production. The Arab uprisings and Turkey's Gezi protests had significant spatial components to their mobilization that reverberated across cities of the world, including Beirut. The urban activists that I am discussing here are, like many of their peers, media-savvy. Through social media, they know about other urban activists' mobilization issues and techniques. They follow them, learn from them, and sometimes exchange with them in conferences and events that they attend together, in Beirut, Cairo, Tunis or Istanbul.

This new generation of urban activists progressively established itself into coalitions, campaigns and NGOs, becoming more visible and vocal. They developed new modes of action and intervention that have led to tangible and successful results, which I now turn to discuss.

### Consolidation: New Types of Actors and Forms of Action

Civil society groups in Lebanon are many, and are well-mobilized vis-à-vis a variety of public issues. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) significantly contribute to a variety of policy sectors, especially education, health and the environment. Until recently, urban issues have been absent from the agenda of NGOs and activists. People are, generally, rather unaware of urbanism as a professional practice and of debates related to urban issues. Housing, urban services, public space, public transportation and informal settlements are not commonly debated topics in the media, in cultural settings or by public audiences.<sup>15</sup> In the past decade, however, more and more urban issues are being discussed in the public sphere, especially among activists who are angry at the ways in which authorities have been managing urban policies, and concerned about making their city a more liveable and inclusive place - as discussed earlier.

Several social media accounts and blogs<sup>16</sup> contribute to these debates. On the ground, besides NGOs and collectives which I discuss further below, visual and graffiti artists also play a role in claiming the city through images and text, politicizing public action although they often present themselves as non-political.<sup>17</sup> Other interesting initiatives which are less spatial in their scope but intellectually relevant to the promotion of spatial practices and urban rights, include projects like Mansion,<sup>18</sup> where activists have occupied a private house for collective use in coordination with the owners, and Outpost,<sup>19</sup> a magazine promoting a substantive understanding of the commons and collective action, which is now discontinued. Some cafés also play a role in providing spaces that bring people together for debates and seminars, such as T-Marbouta, Mezian and others.

A small number of NGOs directly tackled urban issues.<sup>20</sup> Paint Up, an NGO advocating vividly coloured public

<sup>15</sup> Many debates that incorporate a significant urban and spatial component do not address these dimensions: labour policy, real-estate development, industrial policy, tourism, heritage, rent laws, domestic works, youth unemployment, etc. All of these issues are deeply impacted by spatial dynamics, but exclude the spatial from their understanding.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance *Beirut the Fantastic* (<http://spatiallyjustenvironmentsbeirut.blogspot.it/?m=1>), which "fantasizes on Beirut's urban what-ifs".

<sup>17</sup> Well-noted are the works of Ali Al-Rafei, Ashekman, PG Crew, Arofish and others. On the topic see Shawn Saleme, "Walls That Speak: Street Art in Lebanon", *Visual News*, April 8, 2013, <https://www.visualnews.com/2013/04/08/walls-that-speak-street-art-in-lebanon/>; Al-Jazeera World, 'Walls That Speak', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_wnoAcN2b2o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wnoAcN2b2o).

<sup>18</sup> <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14282>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.the-outpost.com/>

<sup>20</sup> The data for this section of the paper build on Mona Harb (2013), "Public Spaces and Spatial Practices: Claims from Beirut", in *Jadaliyya*, 25 October, [http://dars.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14710/public-spaces-and-spatial-practices\\_claims-from-be](http://dars.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14710/public-spaces-and-spatial-practices_claims-from-be)

staircases and benches in the city,<sup>21</sup> wanted to “make Beirut brighter and more beautiful, through colour”. Beirut Green Project<sup>22</sup> voiced “the right to have [green] spaces in our city” and started the “Green Your Lunch” initiative, where people have their lunch break in the city’s existing parks. Masha3<sup>23</sup>, a short-lived initiative, sought to reclaim the city’s public properties. A cluster of people have been working on promoting public transportation and soft mobility initiatives, such as the Bus Map Project which has produced a map of bus routes in metropolitan Beirut,<sup>24</sup> in addition to the Chain Effect, Cycling Circle and Cycle Hack, which are promoting cycling. The Dictaphone Group<sup>25</sup> made several projects commenting on urban spaces in Lebanon through live art interventions, which seek “to celebrate and ‘use’ public landscapes and to prioritize communal spaces within the context of political, social and spatial injustices in Lebanon”. Tandem Works<sup>26</sup> worked on developing a series of initiatives on Beirut River, promoting art interventions, in partnership with neighbouring communities. Public Works<sup>27</sup> is undertaking a campaign for preserving the right to housing in Beirut, in the aftermath of rent law revisions that will progressively cancel subsidized rents, thus threatening affordable housing. A few initiatives are located outside Beirut, such as Lil Madina Initiative,<sup>28</sup> which explores the city of Saida and seeks to improve its liveability through urban planning and design tools. Among this variety of small-scale initiatives, I will single out and examine three that have had successful impacts on urban policy: one NGO (Nahnoo) and two coalitions (The Campaign for the Preservation of Dalieh, and Against the Fouad Boutros Highway).<sup>29</sup>

The first success story is the campaign that the Nahnoo NGO managed for the re-opening of Beirut’s largest park, Horch Beirut, which finally opened its doors to the public in September 2015, after years of relentless efforts on

the part of Nahnoo. Nahnoo is an NGO actively involved in empowering youth and promoting their participation in public issues.<sup>30</sup> One of its key goals is the promotion of public life through public parks, as they believe that public spaces provide “a new platform for behavioural change” and promote citizenship. Their target space is Horch Beirut, the “Pine Forest of Beirut”, and a city-scale public space that was burned down by Israeli airfare during the civil war and that lost all its trees. After the end of the civil war, the Lebanese government received a grant from the French and Italian governments to re-plant the park. The area was closed off for years to allow the trees to grow. However, more than twenty-five years later, and even though the trees are now well grown, the park remains sealed off from public access. The municipality of Beirut, which oversees the park, provides a range of justifications for closing the park: the potential threat of sectarian explosion, moral disorder, people’s lack of civility, the lack of financial and human resources to monitor the park’s use, etc. Nahnoo adopted a negotiation policy with the municipality and worked closely with its councillors, attempting to influence its decision. After several years of lobbying, they changed their strategy and became more aggressive in their campaign, using media and social media tools to denounce the closing of the park, organizing protests to request its opening, and building a legal case against the municipal decision to close it down. When a new governor was appointed for Beirut, who was more sympathetic to the cause of opening the park, Nahnoo capitalized on that policy window and convinced the governor (who has executive power for the city of Beirut) to open the park one day a week. This was a pilot test during which Nahnoo mobilized dozens of volunteers to patrol the park, while insuring order and cleanliness. After demonstrating that the park is secure and maintained, the park started opening on Sundays, as of September 2015, and became patronized by a large variety of users, without any record of incidents. As of June 2016, the park opened on a daily basis.

<sup>21</sup> Pictures of the initiatives undertaken by Paint Up can be seen on these links: <http://dihzahyners.tumblr.com/>; <https://www.facebook.com/Dihzahyners?fref=ts>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://beirutgreenproject.wordpress.com/about/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/masha3.org>

<sup>24</sup> [busmap.me](http://busmap.me)

<sup>25</sup> Dictaphone has worked on the téléphérique in Jounieh (Bet Teleferique), on the Beirut coastline (The Sea Is Mine), and on the railways of Beirut. <http://www.dictaphonegroup.com/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.tandemworks.org/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://publicworksstudio.com/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://lilmadinainitiative.wordpress.com/>

<sup>29</sup> Both Nahnoo and Dalieh benefited from the legal advice of Legal Agenda, an activist legal NGO that seeks to empower civil society through legal tools, <http://english.legal-agenda.com/about.php?lang=en%20-%20.Vkj4oGQrLZs>.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nahnoo.org/>

The second success story is that of the campaign led by the Dalieh Civil Coalition for the preservation of a large coastal area of Beirut,<sup>31</sup> which was threatened by private real-estate development. The Dalieh of Beirut is a beautiful rocky and hilly formation that extends over a large landscape along the Mediterranean Sea. It includes the Pigeon Rock, the emblem of Beirut's seascape, which is featured on one of its national bills. The Dalieh was always an accessible open area, patronized by hundreds of Beirutis during their free time. It is also used by fishermen, divers and swimmers. The Kurdish community of Beirut celebrates its Nowrouz events on the site. Indeed, it is place of diverse social and spatial practices that incorporates the collective memory of large groups of Beirutis (Saksouk-Sasso 2015). The Dalieh lands were converted from shared property (*mushaa'*) to private property in the 1960s. The owners never tried to build, as the construction law for such seafront plots does not provide sufficient real-estate values. In the 1990s, Rafik Hariri bought these plots from all owners, expanding the property size that he could eventually build on. His assassination in 2005 put a halt to the plan. However, his heirs have resumed interest in developing the Dalieh hill for touristic consumption. The Dalieh Coalition mobilized against this project: they started documenting the site's multiple assets, by putting together a team of architects, urban planners and designers, landscape architects, historians, ecologists, archaeologists and water experts, who contributed to authoring a report on Dalieh's rich natural resources, which is available on the coalition's website. They also built a legal file on the history of property changes, identifying loopholes through which one could intervene to contest its privatization. This legal research also exposed the attempts to change the construction law, exclusively on the lots acquired by Hariri, so as to accommodate improved building opportunities. The coalition organized an international ideas competition, which drew dozens of responses from which five were selected as winning entries,<sup>32</sup> providing viable ecological visions for preserving Dalieh. The entries were then exhibited to the public, in various venues in the city, and were used to raise further awareness about Dalieh as a threatened site but also as a site of opportunities,

which would preserve both the site's socio-cultural and ecological values. The competition brief and the winning entries are all accessible for viewing on the campaign's website. They also wrote an open letter to Mr. Rem Koolhaas, the famous architect who was hired as a consultant, which was widely circulated electronically.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the campaign members argued for the placement of Dalieh on the 2015 World Monument Fund endangered list, which gives it a symbolic international weight that comes in very handy in negotiating for its preservation. Campaign members also met with people who are close to Dalieh's owners, and informed them of the disastrous ecological and socio-cultural consequences of building on this land. These multiple actions contributed to shedding light on the important value of Dalieh for the city, and dissuaded its owners from moving ahead with their construction plans, at least until now.

The third success story is the *Stop the Highway, Build a Park* civil coalition,<sup>34</sup> which fought against the implementation of a highway (conceived in the 1960s) in the dense neighbourhood of Achrafieh that was to cut across a heritage area, and disrupt its urban and social fabric. The coalition imposed on the municipality to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment study, which had a negative conclusion and ultimately halted the project. If built, the Fouad Boutros Highway would cut across the historical neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael. Sitting on a hill, the neighbourhood includes charming staircases, gardens and early twentieth-century houses of particular architectural character. The highway project was conceived in the 1960s, during the era when private cars and infrastructural policies dictated the elaboration of urban plans, and was believed to be the best solution for traffic problems. Members of the municipality of Beirut dug out the project and reclaimed it, arguing it would solve the major traffic problem blocking Achrafieh, a neighbourhood in the eastern section of the city. They wanted to give it the name of Fouad Boutros, a renowned politician, as a testimony to his great contributions. They had received funds, which they needed to spend, and the municipal council opted to use them on this project for reasons that were not made public. When a

<sup>31</sup> <http://dalieh.org/>

<sup>32</sup> [http://interviews.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23169/dalieh%25E2%2580%2599s-civil-campaign%25E2%2580%2599s-open-competition\\_three-w](http://interviews.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23169/dalieh%25E2%2580%2599s-civil-campaign%25E2%2580%2599s-open-competition_three-w)

<sup>33</sup> The letter was published on Jadaliyya, <http://www.arabic.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20264/open-letter-to-mr.-rem-koolhaas>. Mr. Koolhaas responded to the letter in the comments section, with a vague reply saying that his firm has not been hired yet to undertake the study.

<sup>34</sup> <https://stopthehighway.wordpress.com/the-hekmeh-turk-fouad-boutros-project/>



group of activists, architects and urban designers who were familiar with this neighbourhood learned of the municipal council's plans, they mobilized against the project, and started a research process. They found out that the plots in question had already been expropriated for the highway passage, and were categorized as public municipal property. Documenting the site, they found that the damage done by the highway would extend beyond Mar Mikhael, threatening the social and economic life of other neighbourhoods, which would be cut off from each other. They also identified interesting opportunities to use the public lands that were already expropriated as open spaces, which could serve as a hilly park for the whole area of East Achrafieh. Importantly, they asked transportation planners to undertake a traffic study to confirm whether the highway would really solve the traffic issues of Achrafieh, as the municipality was claiming it would. The study revealed that the traffic improvement will be minimal, and that traffic management solutions would yield better outcomes. The activists decided to provide an alternative solution to the highway: they worked on an urban design alternative, which is the Fouad Boutros Park that they drew and rendered. They established a website with the name of their coalition and launched a petition against the highway, favoring the park as an alternative. They gathered thousands of signatures. Backed by the Ministry of Environment, they lobbied the municipality, using the environment law, requesting that it conducts an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study for the project. Reluctantly, the municipality agreed to launch the EIA. The company in charge of drafting the EIA initiated a lengthy consultation process, which included many activists. Results revealed a negative assessment for the impact of the highway project on Achrafieh. The municipality of Beirut shelved the project.

These success stories helped build strong ties among urban activists. They also provided them with a steep learning curve and accumulated know-how. It is worth noting that this second generation of activists used novel modes of action in its operations. They privileged

research and action-research, collected ethnographic data, used historical methods, reached out to acquire legal knowledge, did mapping and visual surveys, organized workshops and debates, networked with experts, and produced documentation, reports and alternative visions. They also used lobbying, negotiation, media and social media, protests, legal tools, as well as performances, installations and competitions. Activists were organized in loose ways: even within NGO structures, participants relied on informal modes of coordination and communication, outside the rigid and hierarchical forms of power and management, privileging instead horizontal means of exchange, and prioritizing inclusion and participation in the processes of decision-making and implementation.

In sum, Beirut had become a key site for the production of urban activists who are organized in a diversity of groups, drawing on a range of resources and on proximity between leaders, and furthering rich, productive and innovative relations between these activists. Let us now turn to witnessing how this increased production of activists has led to the crystallization of urban rights activism.

#### **Urban Activism Enters Politics: Beirut Madinati**

In July 2015, the contract providing the Sukleen Company with a monopoly on waste disposal in Beirut and Mount Lebanon came to an end, after two decades of service.<sup>35</sup> Due to internal bickering and corruption among sectarian political leaders,<sup>36</sup> no alternative for garbage collection was found in due time, thus leading mounds of garbage to start accumulating in the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and resulting in a major health hazard. This weakness in the political system provided a policy opportunity that was put to good use by the activists, whose local networks mobilized and got wired: an unprecedented wave of discontent and protests swamped Beirut's Martyrs' Square on August 29, 2015. People rallied in downtown Beirut in a protest that gathered about one hundred thousand people: it was the first time in the history of post-war Beirut that such

<sup>35</sup> Solid background materials on the garbage crisis are authored by Abu-Rish (2015) and Boutros Joelle (2015), "Garbage Crisis in Lebanon—1997. Same Policy, Repeated History", *Legal Agenda*, 16 October, <http://english.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=728&lang=en>

<sup>36</sup> The (opaque) story goes that a contractor close to the Hariri family leads Sukleen, which manages waste at the high cost of \$150/ton, twice as much as in other countries. The other (also opaque) story goes that the Hariri family had settled an agreement with Walid Joumblatt, warlord and leader of the Druze community in Lebanon, to dispose of the garbage in the Chouf mountains—a territory under his control. It is not clear why the contract with Sukleen was terminated rather than renewed as usual. It is probably related to the fact that people in Chouf no longer accepted being the recipients of the waste of Greater Beirut, having for more than fifteen years suffered the huge health costs, and mobilized against it vehemently, thus sending a clear sign to Joumblatt that he could no longer count on their acquiescence. No other sectarian leader in government dared volunteer to provide a waste dump in the territory under his jurisdiction, leaving the issue of where to dispose of waste as an open problem.

numbers of protestors had taken to the streets to make an issue-based claim, transcending sectarian lines.

Led by a group calling itself “#YouStink” (*Tel3it Rihetkun*), dozens of small coalitions, NGOs and independent activists took to the streets, requesting an ecological waste management plan, the resignation of the Minister of Environment and a new election law. Other demands included reliable basic services, free access to public spaces and the coastline. In addition, the activists raised a remarkable slogan for the first time post-2006,<sup>37</sup> requesting accountability from all political leaders for failed public services and corruption: protestors held pictures of all political leaders in the Martyrs’ square, chanting *kellun yaani kellun* (“all of them means all of them”). What became known as *al-Hirak* (“the movement”) included a range of NGOs, experts and many activists across several fields (human rights, ecology, urban issues, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s rights, etc.). It also incorporated new collectives, of which the most visible were *Bedna Nhasib* (“We Want Accountability”) and *Al-Shaab Yurid* (“The People Want”). In many ways, *al-Hirak* “[renewed] recurrent topics of contestation and [reinvigorated] older forms of activism”.<sup>38</sup>

Quickly afterwards, however, *al-Hirak* started disagreeing on methods of action and splintering into subgroups. Simultaneously, the government organized its own repressive action, and violently attacked and arrested protestors who were attempting to take over closed-off squares in downtown Beirut. The government also used classic methods of divide-and-conquer, co-optation, and spreading rumors on the ethics and sources of funding of some leaders of *al-Hirak*, which weakened people’s trust and scared many away. Violence was justified through narratives accusing youth of disrupting the social and moral orders, and threatening security. As many have argued, cities are not only sites of contestations but also sites of control, and the state will always seek to recuperate the margin it may lose, through a variety of tactics ranging from co-optation to spreading false rumors

to policing (Uistermark et al. 2012: 2546). *Al-Hirak* was thus rapidly silenced.

Galvanized by *al-Hirak*’s mobilization, networks of activists (those working on human rights, democracy, policy reform, the environment, and urban and LGBTQ+ issues) came together and decided to organize a campaign for the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut: they named themselves *Beirut Madinati* (“Beirut, My City”, which I refer to as BM). In only a few months, the group acquired about one hundred members. Local networks of activists got wired, and “the spark [became] fire”, as Uistermark et al. argued for other contexts (2012). Beirut Madinati’s activists wrote bylaws, a code of ethics, a municipal program, a media and communication strategy and a fundraising strategy. They recruited hundreds of volunteers, and drafted a vetting strategy document that oriented the selection of municipal candidates.<sup>39</sup> For the first time in the history of elections in Lebanon, the list included 50 percent men and 50 percent women, none of whom came from the political establishment. It opposed the “Beirutis’ list” that was sponsored by Saad Hariri and led by Jamal Itani, the CEO of Solidere (the real estate company that epitomizes the neoliberal reconstruction of Beirut). The Beirutis’ list also brought together all the representatives of sectarian political parties who, typically, forgot they were yesterday’s enemies. Beirut Madinati organized neighborhood debates (*masahat niqash*) that resembled to public hearings, where different urban realities were voiced and debated.<sup>40</sup> On elections’ day in May 2016, the campaign rallied more than 1,000 volunteers. Beirut Madinati did not win, but gathered 32 percent of the votes, while the Beirutis’ list got 43 percent. It was an outcome that greatly exceeded the campaign’s expectations. Had the electoral system been proportional, ten of Beirut Madinati’s candidates would be serving on the capital’s municipal council today. As one observer told me, Beirut Madinati lost the elections but was victorious.<sup>41</sup>

Beirut Madinati epitomizes the new type of activism in post-*Hirak* Lebanon, which can be qualified by five

<sup>37</sup> After the conflict of May 2008 during which Hizballah attacked Beirut’s neighborhoods and raided Hariri’s Future Movement’s offices, no one dared critiquing Hezbollah and its Shiite ally, Amal movement.

<sup>38</sup> Abiyaghi et al., “From isqat an-nizam at-ta’ifi”, 78.

<sup>39</sup> See their website, [www.beirutmadinati.com](http://www.beirutmadinati.com), to check these documents, as well as their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The Beirut Madinati crowdfunding campaign gathered close to \$200,000 in less than three weeks. I am one of the early members of Beirut Madinati. This and the next paragraph are based on my insider’s experience of the movement.

<sup>40</sup> This point is inspired from Blik and Meilvang’s discussion of civic green activists in Nordhaven (2015).

<sup>41</sup> Informal conversation, May 2015. Of course, Beirut Madinati is not to be romanticised and incorporates many challenges. For a critical review of its municipal campaign, see Cambanis, *People Power and its Limits*.

key features: flexible organizational setup, leaderless politics with a feminist agenda, action-research and legal know-how, as well as virtual networking. Such an activism is not merely interested in challenging the sectarian political system by bringing a novel set of alternative political actors to power: it seeks to dismantle sectarian politics in order to build a secular state, promoting values of social justice, equity, inclusion and people-centered politics, with a focus on cities as key sites where these values should be materialized. As such, this is a progressive type of activism that seeks to identify the “interstitial openings for seeds to grow”, in the hope of multiplying them as this would ultimately coalesce into a social movement which may overthrow the ruling order. It is also an activism made possible by the high density and diversity of activist organizations that have consolidated over the past decade in the city of Beirut.<sup>42</sup>

Urban activists have not been only consolidating their action in the capital city of Beirut. With varying successes, they have also been mobilizing in other cities and towns of Lebanon. A quick review of independent municipal campaigns that ran for the 2016 municipal elections, shows that about 20 of such campaigns were active at the time. Very few won seats to the municipal council but they scored decent number of votes, similarly to Beirut Madinati. Many of these campaigns got inspired by Beirut Madinati, which was the first one to run, as municipal elections ran over 5 weeks, starting with the district of Beirut. Some even named their campaign similarly, such as Baalbak Madinati and Nabatiyeh Madinati. In many ways, Beirut Madinati’s high scores at the elections sent a signal to all political groups - mainstream and opposition - that entering the political system was a clear and attainable possibility.

Following the municipal elections’ euphoria, Beirut Madinati dwindled down. Similarly to urban social movements elsewhere (Uistermark et al. 2012: 2549), BM was weakened by inner divisions and fragmentation. However, it still continues to operate today, with a smaller body of volunteers who are allied with other activists, focusing on specific urban issues. Currently, a group is working on protecting Beirut’s

coastline, seeking to return the sea to its people by developing an alternative coastal master plan,<sup>43</sup> while another is contributing to organizing for a viable waste management policy, within the Waste Management Coalition which is a group of civil society organizations, experts and environmental activists working towards sustainable waste management in Lebanon.<sup>44</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

This paper discussed how, in reaction to exclusive urban policies, activists in Beirut mobilized gradually into an urban rights movement that is concerned with recovering the liveability of their city and its shared spaces. Indeed, the experiences of Fouad Boutros Highway, Dalieh, Horch Beirut, Al-Hirak and the many other examples that I am not discussing in this paper, provided what Nicholls (2009: 84) analyzed as “the strategic values of place”, namely: repeated encounters and more opportunities for diverse coalitions and activists to connect to one another, forging trust and strong ties, and ensuring the stability that is needed to consolidate connections into a more tightly clustered and relational unit. As the literature shows, “stronger ties generate forms of social capital that enable diverse actors to mobilize and coordinate their resources in contentious political enterprises”, as it allows activists to “draw on norms, trust, frames, and solidarities to quickly re-group and fight” (Nicholls 2009: 84).

How can urban activists sustain their organizing and action, amidst a highly contentious sectarian political environment, which will surely fight their consolidation through multiple tactics, but also amidst huge constraints that are related to their own durability over time, and to their volunteering base and limited financial and human resources (El Kak, 2019)? Indeed, one of the most challenging hurdles faced by urban activists today is that they are predominantly organized into professional or academic bodies, with limited embeddedness in urban neighbourhoods. As such, they are often critiqued as operating from their ivory towers, or dismissed as framing urban issues as “cosmetic makeover(s)”, in ways that do not recognize systemic problems of the city’s political economy (Khneisser 2018: 12).

<sup>42</sup> As authors show, the density and diversity of urban settings provide activists with “relational opportunities” that enable access to resources, as well as with “emotion-generating interactions” that fuel and shape struggles, and may sustain mobilisation. Nicholls and Uistermark, *Cities and Social Movements*, 11, 16.

<sup>43</sup> For an overview of this initiative, see <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/29145-returning-the-sea-to-the-people-of-beirut-the-dream-of-some-urban-planners>

<sup>44</sup> <https://wmclebanon.org/en/home-ar/en/home/>

Another way of framing the work of urban activists is through understanding activism as being relational and co-produced through multiple types of organizing and collective action (Pieterse and Simone 2018). As such, urban activists who are also academic and/or professional experts should not be evaluated through their embeddedness in neighbourhoods or through community organizing. Their role is not to directly lead the arduous process of social mobilization, collective action and political change, but rather to contribute to its mechanisms. The study of urban activism in Beirut rather reveals that the urban activists' role is two-fold. On one hand, they produce research and substantiated knowledge that *indirectly* impacts activism, either through other activists whom they are connected to (those who are able to operate through grassroots initiatives) and/or through investigative journalists and writers (who frame and disseminate policy issues in ways that advance critical debate and informed action). On the other hand, they *directly* advocate for and lobby with decision-makers and the media regarding the urban issues that they are defending, or they participate in political endeavours when they occur (e.g. Beirut Madinati, Naqabati). In a context of soaring socio-spatial and economic inequalities, where central and local governments are selling and privatizing public spaces, urban activists are key actors to inform other activists, collective actors and political groups on the necessity to protect the commons, and how political change is rooted in the *urban* and in processes of *spatial* production (Lefebvre 1970). In sum, urban activism in Beirut carries several learning lessons for mobilization and social movements in the context of hybrid political regimes that are certainly worth further investigation.

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# The Lebanese Feminist Movement: Intifada of the Body and Rise of a Feminist Political Economy Agenda

Bernadette Daou<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

A central - and ironic - issue facing feminist movements in Arab countries, and especially in Lebanon, is that they are accused of being vectors of westernization, whereas feminist movements were born and developed amongst nationalist and communist movements and in the midst of the struggles for national liberation. Feminism did not emerge as a foreign ideology that was 'imposed' by colonialism, but is rather indigenous to our societies where women have, for long, struggled for equality and social justice as well as against the subordination of women in the patriarchal society and, particularly, in family through sectarian personal status laws. This paper aims to challenge this polemic vision stemming from the essentialist differentiation between western feminism and eastern feminism, and to study the historical context in which feminist movements have emerged and developed.

While this study is not based on any normative political theory, the author does not pretend to be free of normative compulsions. This paper embraces the author's passion and interest about feminism, and asserts the necessity of finding alternative 'ways of doing politics'. It adopts a broad definition of feminism, which includes women organizations that do not necessarily claim their affiliation to any specific feminist philosophical school of thought. In fact, the diversity of feminist currents is, sometimes, reflected as a 'feminist versus not feminist' dichotomy. While some organizations publicly proclaim their adoption of feminist and anti-patriarchal ideologies, some others refuse to be identified as feminists due to the social and political stigma which is associated with this attribute and which is embedded in common beliefs such as "westernization endangers our culture and traditions".

The objective of this study is to reflect on feminism in Lebanon, its modes of organization, its (sometimes) ambiguous relation with the patriarchal and confessional system, its modes of recruitment, and its capacity to mobilize and initiate social change. It builds

on fieldwork that the author has started to conduct at the end of 2012, and that consisted of two main phases:

- The first phase consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews, with twenty-five feminists and gender activists (men and women). These interviews enabled the author to reconstruct biographical narratives on the historical and pivotal moments that marked the militant feminist journeys, but also the history of Lebanese feminism, in particular, in order to restore it in a long temporality: from the 1950s through the 1970s, the turning point in the 1990s, the post-war period, the change of direction following the 2000s, and more recently the post-2011 uprisings in Arab countries. Thus, the author tries in this paper to show that "the waves" metaphor that is used to pronounce the different feminist generations as the "daughters of their time", is valid. In their modes of organization and mobilization, their discourse and their ideological references, these feminist generations are very strongly related to the political and societal issues of the time being - not to forget the international context which influences them at all levels. For example, today, the modes of enunciation of feminist organizations in Lebanon are strongly affected by the constraints and conditions that are imposed by the civil society's donors.
- The second phase focused on the author's close observation of actors within feminist organizations and collectives. This observation allowed her to understand the internal dynamics of the groups, their modes of organization and their (sometimes) exclusionary effects, and the hegemonic relations that are played out within these groups. She also examined the difficulties that these activists are facing in translating their principles of democracy and freedom into the praxis of their groups. These "formal" observations have also been enriched by thoughtful participatory observations, and by taking active part in numerous leftist and

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feminist initiatives, which allowed the author to access new and original information that would have been difficult to access by a more distant observer.

The feminist movement in Lebanon is organized in waves<sup>2</sup>, which are often born in response to a specific “event”. In fact, these “waves” could be analytically compared to the concept of “cycle of mobilizations” that is developed by Sidney Tarrow who defines it as a “growing then decreasing wave of collective actions and reactions which are closely linked to them”<sup>3</sup>, Tarrow’s cycle includes three phases: “the ascending phase of revolt, i.e. that of the ‘moment of madness’ when everything seems possible, a zenith phase marked by the radicalization of actions, and a downturn which, itself, is punctuated four times (by the creation of new organizations, the routinization of collective action, the satisfaction - even if partial - of the demands, and disengagement).”<sup>4</sup>

This research paper is based on a socio-historical analysis of discourses and agendas of women’s organizations in Lebanon. It attempts to analyze the dynamics of the feminist movement in the country from a historical perspective, all while measuring the social, cultural and political factors that facilitate or hinder the movement’s historical development. The research findings are presented in two parts. The first section highlights the conditions of the chronological emergence of the various feminist waves in Lebanon, and the second section discusses the impacts of the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world.

## 1. Mapping women organizing in Lebanon: Four waves of feminist action

Women in Lebanon have actively taken part in nationalist and anti-capitalist struggles starting from independence times to resisting the Israeli occupation, in addition to actively engaging in class struggles within workers and students’ movements. However, their male comrades have had the tendency to be hegemonic and to appropriate their struggles, thus alienating and pushing back their feminist agendas as they were not considered a revolutionary priority.

Most studies take the early nineteenth century as a starting point for the examination of social movements and especially women’s movements in the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon<sup>5</sup>. This period began with the “Egyptian campaign” that was led by Napoleon Bonaparte, and continued with the rise of Arab liberalism, which is referred to as the “Arab Cultural Renaissance” (*al-Nahda*). In fact, women issues became of central importance towards the mid-nineteenth century.

**“The pioneers of the Nahdah regarded women’s inferior status as the basic cause for the backwardness of the Arab and Islamic societies, and were unanimous in affirming that there will be no renaissance for Arabs and Muslims without the renaissance of Arab women.”<sup>6</sup>**

The *Nahda*’s pioneers were men and a minority of women who enjoyed an advanced social status, were educated and contributed to the development of a movement for the “woman’s renaissance”, as explained by Caroline Sukkar in her research on women’s movement in Lebanon. They advocated for the education of women, so that they become better housewives and provide better education for the future generations of the nation<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> On the successive waves of feminism, read the first chapter of the book: Charlotte Kroklokke, Anne Scott Sorensen, *Gender Communication Theories and Analyses from Silence to Performance*, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Isabelle Sommier, “Cycle de mobilisation”, in, Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, Cécile Péchu, *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, Presses de Science Po, 2009, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Karam, Karam, *Le mouvement civil au Liban. Revendications, protestations et mobilisations associatives dans l’après-guerre*, Paris, Karthala, 2006. Traboulsi, Fawwaz, *An Intelligent Man’s Guide to Modern Arab Feminism*, Al-Raida, Volume XX, No. 100 Winter 2003, p. 16.,

<sup>6</sup> Traboulsi, Fawwaz, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Traboulsi, 2003, *op. cit.*; Sukkar, Caroline, *The Lebanese Council of Women: the issues of its protest movement (Al-Majlis Al-Nisa’i Al-Lubnani: Ishkalyat Harakatihi Al-Matlabiah)*, Master’s thesis, Lebanese University – Social Sciences Institute - Section 2, 2003, p. 50-51.

**FIRST WAVE – the suffragettes**

The first wave was spearheaded by women activists from the Lebanese bourgeoisie, with a high level of education. Their main cause was to end the French mandate. In this nationalist perspective, they claimed the right of women to vote and participate in political life. The first electoral law, issued in 1950, discriminated against women and deprived them of their political rights<sup>8</sup>. The suffragettes' campaign included door-to-door petition signing<sup>9</sup>, demonstrations and the organization of coordination meetings<sup>10</sup>.

At the time, women's organizing was divided, according to sectarian lines, between Muslim and Christian charitable organizations. The first was *Jam'iyat al-tadamon al-Nisa'i* (Women Solidarity Association), headed by Laure Tabet<sup>11</sup>. The second, *Ittihad al-Nisa'i al-Loubnani* (The Lebanese Union of Women), was founded in 1920<sup>12</sup>. The suffragettes' mobilizations led to the foundation of a union of women's organizations under the umbrella of the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW), in 1952, in the aftermath of the fulfillment of the demands for political rights<sup>13</sup>.

This campaign did not prompt the crystallization of an independent feminist agenda, as it benefited from the protection of the founding father of the *Kataeb* (Phalanges), Pierre Gemayel, who wanted to "modernize and westernize the woman and the country."<sup>14</sup> These Lebanese pioneers of feminism were generally not part of the concerns of the popular circles, within which they had no relay. Moreover, the LCW mirrored institutional sectarianism, with its alternating leadership between Christians and Muslims. Therefore, the first feminist wave in Lebanon can be considered as non-radical, disconnecting feminism from social and structural issues<sup>15</sup>.

An exception to the charitable and religious women organizing is the establishment of *Lajnat houqouq al-mar'a al-lubnanya* (League for Lebanese Women's Rights LLWR)<sup>16</sup>, which was affiliated with the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), in 1947. LLWR's goals included the promotion of women rights, development in urban and rural areas, the provision of services of childcare and education, and the reinforcement of Lebanon's independence and sovereignty. Moreover, LLWR's founding members came from diversified sectarian backgrounds, which reflected their secular affiliations. They linked women issues to economic and social development, in addition to national independence. The feminist discourse of the first wave reveals overlap and confusion between the national "modern" identity and the "traditional" women identity within the family, which also reflects the discourse of the political parties of that period – the left parties as well as the right ones<sup>17</sup>.

**SECOND WAVE - the rise of the new-left feminism**

The second wave, following the disintegration of the national bourgeoisie<sup>18</sup> and their development projects in the Arab states, testifies the transition from nationalist feminism to left-wing feminism. The beginning of the second wave can be traced back to the late 1960s. This era was marked with the disillusionment caused by the defeat in the 1967 war<sup>19</sup>. It was characterized by partisan feminism, as women's organizations only appeared as appendages to partisan organizations. For example, *al-Tajammo' al-nisa'i al-dimocrati al-lubnani* (Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering - LWDG), founded in 1976, was a sister organization of *Munazamat al-'amal al-shuyu'i fi lubnan* (the Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon - OCAL); while *al-Ittihad al-nisa'i al-taqaddumi* (the Progressive Women's Union), founded in 1980, was affiliated with the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP).

The organizations of the second wave based their movements' vision on modernity, development and

<sup>8</sup> Shamas Shoukeir, Iman, *Nisa' fi imra'a, sirat Laure Moughayzel* (Women in one woman, the life of Laure Moughayzel) Annahar, Beirut, 2002, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with LLWR activist, on May 10th 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Shoukeir, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Sukkar, op. cit., p. 57..

<sup>14</sup> Shoukeir, 2002, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Sukkar, 2003, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with LLWR activist, on May 10th 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Charafeddine, Fahmieh, *Al-haraka al-nisa'iyya fi Loubnan* (The women's movement in Lebanon), ESCWA, 2006, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> On this subject, read Amel, Mehdi, *Azmat al-hadara al-'arabiya am azmat al-bougwaziyyat al-'arabiya?* (The Crisis of Arab Civilization or the Crisis of the Arab Bourgeoisie?), Al-Farabi, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Charafeddine, 2006, op. cit.



resistance of the Israeli occupation. However, they could not form a political agenda independently from the political parties with which they were affiliated. An activist accused political parties of leading “*a policy of containment and annexation*” against women’s committees: “[they] encouraged us to form a committee for women but they controlled our work and monitored all our meetings.”<sup>20</sup> Another activist underscored how advocacy did not focus on women’s rights and issues, although this should be an essential dimension of any feminist movement: “*the victory of the feminist cause depends on the victory of the socialist cause*”<sup>21</sup>.

As such, the second wave of feminism failed to take a critical distance from the mainstream ideologies of the left. Consequently, they lost their ability to recruit women, whom they claimed to represent, and particularly women of the lower social classes. In fact, the common definition of social classes within the leftist circles of *al-Haraka al-wataniya al-lubnaniya* (the Lebanese National Movement) was manipulated according to the interests of its various factions. It was a sect-centered definition, rather than one that revolves around the means of production, as per Marxism. Even the people with further inclination towards the left among this generation, including LWDG, failed to translate their secular ideals and the pioneers’ intellectual dynamism into political action<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, they were allied with the Muslim national bourgeoisie that was viewed as

‘national sects’, which they considered to be a driving force in history<sup>23</sup>. This exacerbated communal tensions, through what some sociologists named “*communauté-classe*”<sup>24</sup>. As a result, the left formed alliances with a good national bourgeoisie that was affiliated with Arab nationalism and Muslim sects; against a bad national bourgeoisie, the Isolationists (In’izaliyun), that was affiliated with Lebanese nationalism and Christian sects. Accordingly, the second wave of feminist organizations failed to reconcile between the ideological determinants modeled by the leftist parties and their agendas, specifically the issues of bodily rights and inequalities within the family, which were well-thought-out by the sectarian personal status laws<sup>25</sup>. Hence, women issues became secondary, fading away behind the leftist agendas. The partisan hegemony over feminism was further aggravated by the civil war and the change in the women’s organizations’ mission that became focused on humanitarian aid, in parallel with shy protest against warlords<sup>26</sup>.

### THIRD WAVE – the NGOization<sup>27</sup> of the feminist movement

The third wave started in the early 1990s, preceding preparations for ‘The Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace’ which was convened by the United Nations in September 1995 in Beijing, China. This conference is seen by the 1990s’ activists as a central event in

<sup>20</sup> Interview with OACL’s women committee activist, May 5th, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with LWDG activist on May 16th, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Beidoun, Ahmad, ‘*Lubnan al-ishtirakiy: zuhour jama’a min shabibat ‘al-yasar al-jadid’ wa masaroha fi lubnan al-sittinat* (‘Socialist Lebanon’: The emergence of a group of young people from the ‘new left’ and its trajectory in the Lebanon of the sixties), *Kalamon* vol. 8, fall 2013, <http://www.kalamonreview.org/articles-details-184#axzz5tGZsELbz> (last accessed 10 July 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Saade, Wissam, Mehdi Amel wa mufaraqat al-dawla al-markaziya al-ta’fiya (Mehdi Amel and the paradoxes of the sectarian central state), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 2 July 2019, [https://www.alquds.co.uk/%d9%85%d9%87%d8%af%d9%8a-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85%d9%84-%d9%88%d9%85%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%b1%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b1%d9%83%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84/?fbclid=IwAR2cBBN7wS7A\\_ejt3d2IT8g\\_seDfEhMLvbpMGscoBX\\_Q3HT1ZxrjV2UFic](https://www.alquds.co.uk/%d9%85%d9%87%d8%af%d9%8a-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85%d9%84-%d9%88%d9%85%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%b1%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b1%d9%83%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84/?fbclid=IwAR2cBBN7wS7A_ejt3d2IT8g_seDfEhMLvbpMGscoBX_Q3HT1ZxrjV2UFic) (last accessed 10 July 2019).

<sup>24</sup> On this subject: Samir Kassir, *La guerre du Liban : De la dissension nationale au conflit regional*, Karthala-CERMOC, 1994, p. 91; Fawwaz Traboulsi writes in the magazine of the OCA; *al-Hurriyah* on October 3rd, 1977; “(...) the confrontation of the religion of governors by the religion of the governed, the religion of those satiated by the religion of the hungry”, cited in Walid Daou; “The Trade Union and Workers Movement in Lebanon, a Story of Struggles and Victories”, *Majallat Al-Thawra al-Da’ima* (Permanent Revolution Journal), No. 3, March 2013, <http://permanentrevolution-journal.org/ar/issue3/brief-history-of-labor-movement-lebanon> (last accessed June 15th, 2013); Picard, Elizabeth, *De la « communauté-classe » à la résistance « nationale »*. Pour une analyse du rôle des Chi’ites dans le système politique libanais (1970-1985), *Revue française de science politique*, 1985, pp. 6-35.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with LWDG activist, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Read about the civil resistance to the Lebanese war in Slaibi, Ghassan, *Fil-Ittihadi Kuwa* (Gap in the union), Dar Mokhtar, Beyrouth, 1999

<sup>27</sup> About NGOization read Jad Islah, “The NGOization of the Arab women movement,” *Al-Raida*, Volume XX, No. 100 Winter 2003. Moreover, this process, which was slowed down by the civil war, had been operating since the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s during the Chehabist era, when social movements underwent transformations at the level of the traditional structures. This has allowed newly formed associations to tap into the IRFED mission’s reform plan and participate in government efforts. On this subject read Karam, Karam, *Le mouvement civil au Liban. Revendications, protestations et mobilisations associatives dans l’après-guerre*, Paris, Karthala, 2006.

the development of the feminist movement during the post-civil war and the reconstruction era. It gave international legitimacy to women causes and helped feminism to get rid of partisan hegemony. As an activist explained, the Beijing conference confirmed “that, finally, the feminist agenda is legitimate: [it] became part of an international debate, and it was up to us to make the connection between what was decided at the global level and the campaigns we were conducting at the local level.”<sup>28</sup> The globalization of the feminist cause provided the feminist organizations with new tools of advocacy and lobbying, mainly framed within legal reformism<sup>29</sup>. This globalization also contributed to the proliferation of feminist organizations that relied heavily on international funding. Access to international networks provided them with important technical and financial resources: financial assistance in the form of project grants, capacity building, and training on international human rights instruments<sup>30</sup>.

The transition from “political” activism or volunteering to expert or professional activism is described by Johanna Siméant, who explains how humanitarianism has become a “vocation”: “this growing perception of the humanitarian as a possible ‘job’ is coupled with a process of increasing salaried staff within these NGOs, and is thus correlated with the increase in the budget of the latter and the consequent requirements of the donors for the programs developed”<sup>31</sup>. However, this process also generates questions about representation, which means that only women organizations represent women causes, as this activist explains:

“The communist party’s structures that were in place, like the Najde sha’biye (Lebanese Popular Rescue, LPR), have appropriated the new causes. They tried to adapt their Stalinist structure to new trends in the international discourse. The class struggle and the liberation of society [got] transformed into a

discourse on sustainable development, women’s rights, democracy, and the preservation of the environment. [However, the new causes required] setting up new structures that represent these new movements. The process of professionalization takes place by changing actors within organizations and replacing them with professionals. This leads to tensions and conflicts, which produce new schisms at the level of the traditional left. What is interesting for feminists is the eruption of conflict around [who will represent] women causes in the leadership calling for women-only management.”<sup>32</sup>

The new structures adopt the “new causes” of the 1990s. The militants are transformed into experts, social movements into projects, and the streets into NGOs’ headquarters. The process of professionalization is accompanied by an expansion of the structures, a loss of autonomy in favor of funding, and a prioritization of the accountability of the organizations towards their donors rather than vis-a-vis the women that they claim to represent<sup>33</sup>.

#### **FOURTH WAVE – the rise of the LGBTQ consciousness**

The fourth wave began around the 2000s, within an anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorship movement, revolving around body and identity politics and - more precisely - queer identities. Triggered by the formation of LGBTQ+ consciousness and the growing opposition within the left and against the Syrian regime’s occupation of Lebanon after the civil war<sup>34</sup>, the new left organized around a multitude of issues - ranging from personal and public freedoms, anti-globalization, anti-imperialism and anti-dictatorship<sup>35</sup>. Ghassan Makarem, who writes the history of the birth of Helem explains:

“Several small-scale initiatives had taken place earlier, such as the “I Exist” exhibition organized by Club Free at the end of 2000 and the work of Khatt Mubashir’s radical film club, which aimed to highlight various

<sup>28</sup> Interview with OACL activist, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Daou, Bernadette, *Les féminismes au Liban : un dynamisme de positionnement par rapport au patriarcat et un renouvellement au sein du “Printemps Arabe”*, Master’s Thesis, Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Siméant, Johanna, 2001, « Urgence et développement, professionnalisation et militantisme dans l’humanitaire », *Mots*, n°65. Frédéric Sawicki, 2003, « Les temps de l’engagement. À propos de l’institutionnalisation d’une association de défense de l’environnement », in Lagroye (Jacques) (dir.), *La politisation*, Paris, Belin.

<sup>31</sup> Siméant, 2001, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with LPR activist on 3 October 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Mansour, Nisrine, 2011, *Governing the personal Family law and women’s subjectivity and agency in post-conflict Lebanon*, PhD thesis, London school of economics and political science, p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> Author’s participatory observation between 2001 and 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. The rise of a new left between the years 2000 and 2005 is the subject of another research currently being undertaken by the author.

struggles including sexual liberation within the “Man is a Woman” festival at the end of 2001. The film festival attracted around 1,500 viewers over the course of seven days and introduced issues of sexuality and gender identity. By the end of 2001, these groups began to tackle the issue of sexual liberation. Mobilization against the World Trade Organization meeting in Qatar and post-September 11th war-mongering brought together a large constituency of independent left and democracy activists. (...) Although HELEM was formed to focus on LGBT issues, its roots in Hurriyat Khassa and the anti-imperialist movement led to the adoption of an anti-sectarian, anti-racist and anti-xenophobic position from its inception, and to a focus on social work, especially within marginalized communities. Contrary to assumptions by outside observers, especially those who assume that gay and lesbian identity in the region is the creation of the Westernized middle class. [...] HELEM was open to all individuals who live in Lebanon even if this meant losing some Lebanese members.”<sup>36</sup>

The activists of this wave took a critical stance towards the already existing feminist organizations, especially on the questions of sexual and bodily rights that were totally absent in previous waves<sup>37</sup>. The experience of women in Helem pivoted around the issue of organizational relations between women and men; but gay and lesbian activism reproduced the sexist logics in the society; and gendered dynamics lead, at the end of each episode of disputes, to the withdrawal of more women.

Indeed, the women of Helem withdrew from the organization after attempts of control by their male comrades. “Helem girls” started to meet outside Helem’s premises, for security reasons - as an initiative of a few members. One of the activists said that the need to feel safe for Helem’s women was greater than that for men who considered Zico House<sup>38</sup>, where Helem’s premises are located, as a “safe space”<sup>39</sup>. She added that women “suffer from a double discrimination on the part of society, as women and as lesbians, [and] have different needs than men; hence, our feminism stems, without identifying as such at the beginning”<sup>40</sup>.

“Helem Girls” took the form of a collective where political and religious discussions were forbidden for fear of confessional disputes, since “politics and religion relate to the political parties that are responsible for the civil war, from which they want to take distance”<sup>41</sup>. In her studies on US associations, Nina Eliasoph notes what she calls the evaporation of the political. The lack of political discussions does not mean that people do not have interest in the community, though, as these discussions were taking place “backstage, in hushed tones”<sup>42</sup>. Muting political orientations inside “Helem Girls” did not completely wipe out political discussions, as the members could not avoid them, which led to the founding and progressive restructuring of Nasawiya through cycles of disputes and schisms. Although political discussions were “hushed”, the political divergences emerged through internal disputes and restructuring that transformed the organization from an underground existence to an over-the-ground feminist agenda, supporting all the diversity of causes that are defended by the feminist movement in Lebanon. This process eventually led to the founding of Nasawiya, which used new tools in political organizing such as publishing political content and calls for action on their website and social media pages. This is how *Nasawiya* could document personal and political experiences and produce feminist analysis in a zine called *Sawt el-Niswa*, but also organize direct actions, sit-ins, and demonstrations against racism, sexual harassment and rape, taking back the streets at night as well as fighting violence against women. The group recruited mostly queer women from different religious and political communities, who were typically an educated generation from private universities in Beirut.

The claims made by the fourth wave’s activists largely echoed the writings of Judith Butler, and the radical and black feminist literature in the United States of America. Numerous examples were reflected in their discourse and their writings, depicting the “hatred” of the “white man” without explaining this specific reference and its transposition to the Lebanese context<sup>43</sup>. Meetings were mainly held in English because of the difficulty they had in speaking their jargon in Arabic. This, however,

<sup>36</sup> Ghassan Makarem, 2011, “The Story of Helem”, in *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, Vol.7, n°3, Fall 2011, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Daou, Bernadette, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Zico House is a residence for artists that also serves as a place for several associations in Beirut.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Nasawiya activist, on 26 August 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Nina Eliasoph, 1998, *Avoiding Politics. How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge University Press, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Authors’ field notes.

has marginalized the opinions of non-English speaking women<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, despite their self-positioning on the left, the social class dimension seemed absent from their activism and they even appeared to reproduce class distinctions within the organization<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, they formed a socially homogeneous group: activists from the middle and upper middle class, having completed their studies at English-speaking private universities in the capital city, who monopolized the leadership. They formed an “affinity group” that excluded de-facto people who did not fit those distinguishing features. Isabelle Sommier and Xavier Crettiez define them as “groups of friends who set methods and principles of action in complete independence from others” who have empathy for a near-far cause, a rather abstract cause, a cause that needs resources that are provided by cultural capital, some degree of economic security and belonging to the middle-upper classes<sup>46</sup>.

## 2. An Intifada of the body and the rise of a feminist social justice agenda

Since 2011, an eruption of protest movements, from anti-system campaigns to unionist mobilizations - and more, multiplied. The new feminist mobilizations may be considered as a continuation of the fourth wave, when it comes to advancing bodily rights. However, a new agenda tackling social justice issues is on the rise, linking the demands for a healthy and ecological waste management system with economic reforms and social justice, bodily and personal freedoms, and reproductive justice. These new causes are deployed in the context of the 2011 uprisings and the effects of the counterrevolutions, including political oppression and economic crises induced by prescribed “reforms” schemes of the international financial institutions, which encourage austerity measures and exacerbate the impact of already weak redistribution and welfare services. These mobilizations use new digital technologies to reinforce their means of warfare, but also draw on a more “traditional” repertoire of mobilization, through organizing sit-ins, and writing articles and press releases.

Academic endeavors are racing to document these revolutionary moments while mostly underlining an all-male movement. However, women and gender non-conforming persons were at the forefront of demonstrations, mobilizing, recruiting and organizing. Feminist spaces and women activism are thus shaped by these movements. While professional organizations were thriving with the international funding being addressed to relieve the plight of Syrian women refugees and host communities, grassroots collectives witnessed new formations and the appearance of an intersectional praxis towards a social justice agenda. This section investigates feminist mobilizations within recent movements and their impact on social change - or the lack of it. It depicts the expansions, the dissents and the other impacts that these mobilizations had on feminist and women spaces in Lebanon.

### The post 2011 feminist mobilizations: oppression, resistance, and separatism

This section taps into the genealogy of two campaigns: *Isqat al-Nitham al-Ta'ifi* (Toppling the sectarian regime) in 2011, and the garbage crisis movement of 2015. These campaigns contributed to the reconfiguration of militant spaces, and specifically the grassroots feminist movement in Lebanon. We argue that *Isqat al-Nitham al-Ta'ifi* has reproduced the anti-sectarian discourse since the end of the civil war, while the 2015 campaign is resulting in new initiatives that are “bring[ing] political economy back” to social movements.

The 2011 uprisings in Arab countries inspired social movements around the world<sup>47</sup>, and in Lebanon in particular. Leftist, feminist and other social movements were able to mobilize around a multitude of issues; they organized solidarity marches and sit-ins in front of the different embassies of countries where the uprisings were taking place. Shortly after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, leftist groups in Lebanon called for a meeting to discuss how to topple the sectarian regime (*Isqat al-Nitham al-ta'ifi*)<sup>48</sup>. This initiative involved Nasawiya, the Socialist Forum (SF) and the LCP, but also individuals and art collectives like Zoukak Theatre Company<sup>49</sup>. The campaign succeeded in organizing three

<sup>44</sup> Interviews with Nasawiya activists on 16 and 28 August 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Xavier Crettiez et Isabelle Sommier, (dir.), 2002, *La France rebelle. Tous les mouvements et acteurs de la contestation*, Paris, Michalon, p.651.

<sup>47</sup> Namely, the various occupy movements. Researchers are talking about a new international cycle of contention. In this vein, read Tejerina, Benjamín et al., “From indignation to occupation: A new wave of global mobilization”, *Current Sociology*, Volume: 61 issue: 4, page(s): 377-392, Article first published online: April 17, 2013; Issue published: July 1, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with SF activist, 12 September 2013.

<sup>49</sup> It is worth highlighting the impact of the uprisings on the artistic scenes across the region, where new forms of popular and politicized creations are seeing the light.

large demonstrations in Beirut between 27 February and 8 March 2011<sup>50</sup>, as well as in other cities like Jbeil. The demonstrations were successful and attracted thousands of participants from Beirut, Tripoli, Jounieh, Chouf, Jbeil, Saida, and others. Meetings were held in Beirut on weekdays, and demonstrations took place on weekends to engage employees and workers<sup>51</sup>.

Women and gender non-conforming persons were at the forefront of demonstrations, mobilizing, recruiting and organizing. However, they were not able to push towards the adoption of a feminist agenda within the campaign. In one of the preparatory meetings for a demonstration that focused on demanding equality, a number of feminist activists suggested that women lead the demonstration in order to make a stronger political and symbolic message<sup>52</sup>. The idea “provoked a large dispute in the meeting, as movement leaders (mostly leftist and secular men) rejected it, using a sexist way of expression and a sexist content that lacked any political dimension<sup>53</sup>.” Moreover, the organization of the third demonstration has taken place at the very beginning of the uprising in Syria, which raised the issue of the organization of solidarity action. The idea was also violently rejected, mainly from the PCL and other nationalists, on the basis of supporting the *Mumana'a* (a pejorative take on Resistance against the Syrian uprising) regime in Syria<sup>54</sup>. “We were chanting slogans in solidarity with the Syrian revolution, which brought upon us the disciplining from the men of the [Lebanese] Communist Party”, an activist told me.<sup>55</sup> Bashar el-Assaad’s regime and allies as well the Iranian regime and Hezbollah have accused the protestors in Syria to be Zionist conspiracy perpetrators against the resistance. “The LCP supports the *Mumana'a*, in line with their fight against imperialism

and Israeli occupation, neglecting the fight against (some) dictatorships in the region. The *Mumana'a* representatives considered us as traitors for supporting the Syrian revolution; some even threatened us during the meetings and on social media<sup>56</sup>. The campaign rapidly faded and its members got consumed by non-ending and futile discussions about how to define the system that the activists aspire to, and which sectarian politicians they want to topple<sup>57</sup>.

Consequently, although the movement wanted to topple the sectarian regime, oppression and patriarchal dynamics rapidly became hegemonic during the meetings and demonstrations, which led to the withdrawal of many activists - including feminists and gender non-conforming persons - from attending the campaign’s activities. “We felt that this is not our place, we felt that we have wasted our time to try to educate leftist men; all the screaming and violence and silencing meant for us to leave<sup>58</sup>. Some “convulsive” discussions attempted to analyze the Lebanese system but did not reach a common ground. The campaign was not able to agree on the social and economic structures of exploitation, nor was it able to identify the sectarian forces that remotely controlled the campaign<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, Salloukh et al. demonstrated how sectarian oligarchies have historically tried to control political dissents opposing the sectarian system, and used different tactics to divide and coopt movements that would threaten institutional sectarianism<sup>60</sup>.

Similar concerns were shared by activists who participated in the waste management crisis protests, in summer and fall of 2015. Although some academics described that as a movement that is “mostly led

<sup>50</sup> Saleh, Bassel, “Toppling the sectarian regime in Lebanon, evaluating the experience”, *Bidayat*, Vol. 2, Summer 2012, <https://www.bidayatmag.com/node/308> (last accessed on 16 July 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Author’s participatory observations February - March 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Kobeissi, Farah, “Nahwa yasar nasawi (toward a feminist left)”, *al-Jumhuriya*, 8 July 2016, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/35323> (last accessed on 17 July 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Abbani, Hiba, “Afkar hawla al-yasar wa al-mawqif min al-mar’a (Reflections on the left and its positionality toward the woman)”, *Majallat al-Muntada al-Ishtiraki* (The Socialist Forum Magazine) vol. 1, spring 2012, <http://al-manshour.org/node/7911> (last accessed on 17 July 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Author’s participatory observations February - May 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with SF activist, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with SF activist, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Author’s participatory observations February - May 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Sawt al-Niswa activist, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> Saleh, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> Salloukh, Bassel F., Rabie Barakat, Jinan S. Al-Habbal, Lara W. Khattab, and Shoghig Mikaelian. “Sectarianism and struggles for socio-economic rights.” In *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, 70-87. London: Pluto Press, 2015.

by men"<sup>61</sup>, feminists took an important part of this movement. Feminists marched carrying "*al-nitham al-abawi qatel* (the patriarchal system is deadly)" slogan during the mobilizations of the garbage management crisis in summer and fall of 2015. They marched as a bloc in an attempt to prevent harassment and other kinds of state and male oppression that happen during demonstrations. They also chose to do so after witnessing on TV and social media the mass rapes and harassments exerted by police and male demonstrators in the aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's downfall in Egypt. However, other motives have also led them to make these choices as they attempted to demarcate themselves. One of the participants eloquently said: "we are marching in the feminist bloc because we had enough of the revolutionary men who appropriate the public political space!"<sup>62</sup> The Feminist Bloc during the demonstrations was very visible; its representatives appeared on TV, social media and many newspapers' articles. In addition, Sawt al-Niswa published articles analyzing the crisis and documented, during the demonstrations, several incidents of violence and sexual harassment against women demonstrators; especially on September 20 2015 when the demonstrators reached the parliament building and were attacked by the Amal Movement's police/thugs<sup>63</sup>.

During summer and fall of 2015, thousands of citizens demonstrated in Beirut and in several peripheral regions, in response to a call by the "You Stink" campaign to denounce the waste management crisis.<sup>64</sup> The "You Stink" campaign was launched by a group of activists in the aftermath of the closure of the Naameh dump by a group of demonstrators<sup>65</sup>. Carole Kerbage describes this movement by stating "most of [the] references framed the *Harak* as a secular or non-sectarian movement. However, TV interviews with protestors refuted the 'non-sectarian' or 'secular' framing: out of 594 live TV interviews on Al-Jadeed and LBC, only two protestors

called for a 'secular state' and another five for a 'civil state'. The majority of those who protested against sectarianism/the sectarian regime did so mostly from a standpoint that rejects clientelism and nepotism"<sup>66</sup>.

In addition to violence from the state police and harassments from sectarian thugs, women who took part in this organizing had to face the oppression of their male counterparts from within the movement. For example, women who documented and voiced out the issues of sexual harassment were faced by their male counterparts who questioned the survivors' credibility and accused them of exaggerating, and of negatively affecting the image of the movement<sup>67</sup>. The documentation was also used by mainstream media to attack the demonstrators, but after obscuring what the documentation showed (that both members of the police and other sectarian thugs affiliated with Amal Movement committed the harassment)<sup>68</sup>.

This movement allowed the formation of numerous alliances bringing together individuals, NGOs, unions, political parties and grassroots collectives. We can count three large coalitions, in addition to the Feminist Bloc: *Tol'it rihitkon* (You Stink), *al-Sha'b yurid* (The people want), and *Badna nhasib* (We want accountability). You Stink was mainly formed by NGOs and social media experts, who reflected a depoliticized agenda based on technical expertise in dealing with the crisis, without linking it to a structural and holistic approach. The second and the third coalitions (*al-Sha'b yurid* and *Badna nhasib*) were formed of leftist parties and individuals who had recently joined the demonstrations, and who presented anti-system approaches. 'The People Want coalition' included the Socialist Forum, members of a then-newly founded cooperative (Dammeh), and other individuals from their respective networks. The *Badna nhasib* coalition was mainly led by the LCP and Harakat

<sup>61</sup> AbiYaghi, M. N., Catusse, M. and Younes, M. (2016) 'From isqat an-nizam at-ta'ifi to the Garbage Crisis Movement: Political Identities and Antisectarian Movements,' in Lebanon Facing the Arab Uprisings in Di Peri, R. and Meier, D. (eds.), London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 78. This is not the first time that academics occult the active participation of women in revolutions and uprisings. It also reveals the phenomenon of the "ghost academic" who never actually went to the field and talked to protestors. This is also an indicator of an essentialist view of Arab women to be submissive and accept patriarchal oppression.

<sup>62</sup> Author's participatory observations, September 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Kerbage, Carole, *Politics of Coincidence: The Harak Confronts its "Peoples"*, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, 2017, p. 36. Sawt al-Niswa documentation can be found on the following link <https://sawtalniswa.org/article/511>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Akhbar newspaper, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Kerbage, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> Sawt al-Niswa, Man yakhaf al-tawtheeq (Who fears documentation?), September 2015, <https://sawtalniswa.org/article/520>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

al-Sha'b, and other nationalist parties, unions and youth organizations. The need to join efforts between the different coalitions led the activists to form a coordination committee. The committee's meetings displayed the same power and gender dynamics and political tensions that existed in the 2011 campaign to topple the sectarian regime. One activist affirmed:

"[...] Women face persistent male behavior and attempts to silence, marginalize and exclude them in meetings [...]. These actions come from groups that speak of change and [against] oppression. (...) A few examples: In meetings, especially the coordination meetings (several groups, organizations, leftist, and non-leftist activists), [...] there was little representation of women [...], where the respected word was for the man who raised his voice. When women start talking, they are ignored or silenced. Many women objected to these behaviors, [and] (...) the responses they got were as such: "we want to overthrow the system now, or you want us to rather pay attention to the tone of our voice?"; or "do not be too sensitive, do not take things personal". When there was sexual harassment in the demonstrations, there were women who dared to talk about it. Yet, they were asked to present proofs; as if it was not enough for them to be harassed that they also had to show people what they have been subject to. Many also considered that what happened was "exaggerated", which I also consider an attempt to silence us. Our harassment testimonies were used, as well, to score points either by the authorities, or by political parties within the movement [...]. We were asked to keep quiet so as not to harm the image of the movement. That is what I do not understand! [...] If groups that value this movement do not want to harm it, they must recognize these practices, condemn them, and open the door for initiatives and demands to legally criminalize harassment."<sup>69</sup>

The movement was heavily oppressed by the police and other state institutions and mainstream media. Water tanks, batons, tear gas and live ammunition were used against the protesters<sup>70</sup>. A lot of the demonstrators were arrested, and faced trials in the military courts<sup>71</sup>. They were accused of drug consumption, and many of them were obliged to undertake urine tests at their own cost<sup>72</sup>. State oppression is the main cause why the

movement crushed, but the sexist and violent practices have certainly weakened the movement from within. Moreover, the movement was dominated by three wrong tactics, recapitulated by Rose Nakad: first, the mobilizers needed to show more humility in front of the small victories that they achieved, namely in mobilizing large sectors of the Lebanese society; however, what threatened the movement was the high visibility in the coverage by local and international media. Second, the centrality of street protests killed the momentum, as the movement neglected the decentralization of activities and the organizing within local communities. Third, the protesters shouted, trying to shame people so as to push them to attend the demonstrations, whereas many people who did not physically participate in the protests supported them<sup>73</sup>.

These mobilizations and experiences impacted grassroots feminist organizing, expanded their structures and produced a separatist trend, whereby their position depended one where they "had enough" of the patriarchal system, especially the attitudes coming from within the movement. New organizations saw the light and brought back social and reproductive justice issues, centering women's bodies and experiences.

#### **New tools of action and new issues of contention**

One of the many political outcomes of the 2015 movement consists in reviving popular protests. Since the cooptation of the workers' movement in the 1990s - apart from the public sector employees, economic and social issues became depoliticized through a developmental approach, especially in practice within local and international NGOs<sup>74</sup>. However, the mobilizers had difficulty adopting a feminist agenda, as patriarchal dynamics and oppression were used in order to control women's bodies, voices and experiences, coming from state apparatus and from within the movement, as discussed above. The organization of women-only spaces and mobilizations constituted a necessity for grassroots feminist activists seeking safety and representation. They helped ensuring that women's voices and experiences within popular movements are an inherent part of these movements.

<sup>69</sup> R., Anthony, "Moral exclusion" in the popular movement and the ideology of the ruling class", *al-Manshour*, special issue, Fall 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Akhbar newspaper 2015.

<sup>71</sup> The Legal Agenda, 2015

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Nakad, Rose, "Conceptual Offerings to the Current Movements for Justice," *Sawt al-Niswa*, October 2015, <https://sawtالنيسوا.org/article/513> (last accessed on 17 September 2019)

<sup>74</sup> Slaibi, op. cit. Khattab, op. cit.

**Intersectional women marches**

The Feminist Bloc continued organizing beyond the 2015 movement. The first discussion held was about learning lessons from the movement and building a solidarity network among all the feminist organizations that are active in the country<sup>75</sup>. Since this first meeting, the coalition organized a yearly women's march on International Women's Day (IWD), from 2017 to 2019. The march included only women-led organizations working on causes that feminists adopt: demanding the right to nationality, fighting violence against women, opposing the sponsorship system that governs the migrant domestic workers' work and residence in Lebanon, reproductive and social justice, etc.

The Feminist Bloc adopted an intersectional<sup>76</sup> approach to gather different types of organizations acting on a diversity of causes, which was difficult before. As explained in previous sections, the chase after funding opportunities positioned women organizations in competitive and sometimes even conflictual relationships. Some of the organizations were established NGOs like Kafa, ABAAD and LWDG, others were grassroots and anti-system collectives like the Socialist Feminist Committee (SFC, an autonomous committee within the Socialist Forum) and *Dammeh* cooperative. Moreover, the organizers refused to receive any external funding, and organized a fundraising event to preserve their independence. The fact that this number of organizations joined the march is certainly enriching for the history of feminist movements. However, power dynamics emerged during the preparations for the march and on the day it was held, as an SFC activist explained:

"We were organizing as radical, feminist, grassroots, volunteers and paid workers of established women's organizations... This effected the division of work and played out in the process of organizing. [...] We focused on logistics, and failed to discuss politics, or at least not in detail... politics regarding our stances and strategies when it comes to the feminist struggle in Lebanon, beyond the organization of one march. This failure to discuss politics costs us time, and a valuable opportunity [...]. When movements tend to

appear universal, or mainstream, it is largely because they are non-threatening, and therefore fail to highlight and make visible the complexities of the struggle and the varying experiences of those different groups who experience patriarchy differently, due to race, class, [and] sexual orientation [...]. There was too much of a focus on reaching an agreement so that we can "move on" as if we were working on some imaginary work plan, and had to answer to donors and funders that didn't exist, and the meetings began to feel more like a design meeting of any NGO funded program."<sup>77</sup>

Although the march was meant to offer an alternative women-only space, power dynamics and conflicts within the feminist movement were reflected in the interaction between the organizers. The definition of intersectionality is still subject to debate. However, it is transposed by activists of the fourth wave as an all-encompassing approach<sup>78</sup>. Indeed, the theory has been impacted by neoliberal academia to reflect 'diversity' rather than social contradictions and power relations:

"It is these moves to stretch intersectionality and make it an approach that fits all feminist ontologies that has undermined its radical potential. Precisely because conflicting approaches use intersectionality, and precisely because intersectionality works to hide these conflicts, feminism ends up being presented as a field devoid of power relations, a field of 'diversity'. This goes against intersectionality's radical beginnings, where these conflicts and divisions were made central to feminist analysis, and where power relations – particularly with regard to race and class – were not swept under the carpet but brought to the center."<sup>79</sup>

Still, parts of the organizations forming the Feminist Bloc, specifically radical and Marxist feminists, are using new tools, such as knowledge production, and new issues of contention at the intersection of the body and feminist political economy.

**Knowledge production as a feminist action**

Today, feminism is mobilizing new sectors of society. More people are claiming to be feminist: in addition

<sup>75</sup> Author's participatory observation, on November 21st 2015.

<sup>76</sup> For a thorough discussion of intersectionality, please refer to Salem, Sara, 2016, "Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Volume: 25, Issue: 4, page(s): 403-418.

<sup>77</sup> Bouchmouny, Mira, Reflections on Organizing the International Women's Day March in Lebanon., *Sawt al-Niswa*, 2017, <https://www.sawtalniswa.com/article/621>, (last accessed on 19 September 2019).

<sup>78</sup> Daou, op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> Salem, Sara, 2016, op. cit.



to the in/formal feminists organizing, we can find corporates and enterprises, governmental institutions, some men, and even some perpetrators of violence and harassment against women claiming that too! As discussed before, since the nineties, the state and many feminist organizations have been operating within a set of international texts and tools. The NGOized model, mainly based on service provision and law reform, is highly dependent on funding and professionalized work. Although these renders of feminism should not be completely dismissed, as circulating feminist concepts across popular cultures are crucial for feminism to achieve social change, it is key to note that popularized feminism does not reflect the complexities and contradictions within the historical feminist movement. Indeed, these mainstream structures rarely allow space to challenge patriarchy or acknowledge intersectionality. Rather than trivializing feminism as a reaction to public aggressions/misconceptions against/about women/feminists, it is important to popularize the characteristics of this movement in the *longue durée*.

The digital space has also become a huge tool to mobilize people and elevate voices in powerful new ways. The use of open access online platforms and writings about gender and feminism have been proliferating in the region, and specifically in Lebanon: *al-Jumhuriya*, *Bidayat*, *al-Thawra al-da'ima*, *al-Manshour*, Knowledge Workshop, *Kohl* Journal, *Geem*, and *Daraj*, to name a few. The websites' content is very diverse, tackling a diversity of political issues, namely political oppression, public and private freedoms, arts, religions' history, but also economic crises, Marxist literature and labor issues. All of the websites either have sections dedicated to feminist issues, or are exclusively specialized in them. The published content generally includes commentaries and short videos about the news in Arab countries and trends on social media. They also provide articles and research that range from translating feminist literature to producing local knowledge about women's experiences from the region. The more specialized publications focus on a feminist knowledge production, by the women and for the women of the region. The oral history project within the Knowledge Workshop<sup>80</sup> documents women stories and experiences in diverse fields using a feminist methodology that respects the consent of the interviewees and acknowledges the

power dynamics that could emanate from this type of biographical documentation. Another women-only collective, *Kohl* magazine<sup>81</sup> publishes feminist research and stories about numerous issues, namely de/colonization, women bodies and reproductive justice, economic justice, etc.

Knowledge production can be considered as a feminist tool when it is practiced as an act of emancipating the oppressed<sup>82</sup>. Knowledge is being produced each and every day by feminists on social media to launch campaigns' hashtags, mobilize for actions, protest state and sexist violence, and educate other people, especially men, about feminism and women's struggles. The #MeToo campaign that spread internationally is a good example. The aim behind these efforts is to popularize and open debates about gender, feminism and their meaning in post-revolution Arab countries. They also offer training for new journalists in an alternative framework to the mainstream media. The knowledge that they produce is generally of a rigorous quality, but is sometimes dispersed. It does not seem to follow a plan or an agenda, or to form an intellectual movement inspired by popular uprisings. In this vein, it is important to trace the ways in which ideas travel through time and space and get transposed onto different realities, often involving mutations that may render the idea devoid of its original meanings<sup>83</sup>. For example, *al-Jumhuriya* published an Arabic translation of Catharine A. MacKinnon's "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence" without explaining the context of its production in the 1980s, nor reflecting on its limitations or its relevance to our time and space. The transposition of feminist literature without situating it historically leads to trivialization, rather than popularization, of feminism for Arabic readers. Another example of how gender became a trendy buzzword can be noticed within research centers and organizations that do not have a feminist vision, but have opened gender programs to get access to international funds while, at the same time, criticizing women organizations as being highly dependent on external funding<sup>84</sup>. A common trait of these knowledge production organizations is that the work environment and relations that produce their content is mostly informal, heavily relying on freelance contributors, low-wage labor and unpaid internships, without any social security or job benefits, due to their short-term project cycles and unsustainable structures.

<sup>80</sup> <https://alwarsha.org/> (last accessed on 19 September 2019)

<sup>81</sup> <https://kohljournal.press/>

<sup>82</sup> De Sousa Santos, Boaventura, "Epistemologies of the South and the future", *From the European south* vol. 1 2016, p. 17-29.

<sup>83</sup> Said E (1983) *Traveling theory*. In: *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 226-247.

<sup>84</sup> Overview of Gender Actors & Interventions in Lebanon

### **Women bodies at the center of a feminist political economy**

The issues related to economic and social security that erupted during the 2015 movement opened the space for another novelty within the feminist discourse. New issues that are being addressed, especially among grassroots organizations, concerning the economic rights of women. Since 2011, the international donors' community has been focusing on the creation of jobs as a mean to fight poverty<sup>85</sup>. Middle to upper-middle classes of youth and women are encouraged to open small social enterprises, and to resolve social problems through innovation, entrepreneurship, branding and the individualization of social struggles. These new developmental models may be leading to an increase in women's informal labor participation, as well as in their ghettoization in domestic labor and cheap manufacturing. Nonetheless, radical feminist organizations are bringing back political economy to their feminist analysis and agendas. The A Project presents an intersectional, structural and constructivist approach to feminist organizing<sup>86</sup>. Current grievances in Lebanon are being experienced on two levels: the oppression of personal and public freedoms, as well as the socioeconomic crisis and people's impoverishment. The first level has recently materialized through the Mashrou' Leila's ban that was imposed by religious clergy and fanatics, whereas the second through the mobilizations for the right-to-work of refugees. However, both campaigns stayed disconnected, and the right-to-work campaign was not inclusive of Syrian refugees who are being forcibly deported<sup>87</sup>.

Part of the members of the Dammeh cooperative started a new process of discussing and learning from their prior experience in Nasawiya, pushing for a more radical intersectional approach to gender, race and class. They chose to remain independent from external funding and to survive, instead, on their members' contributions and various fundraising events<sup>88</sup>.

"The cooperative is built on values of social, economic, environmental, and gender justice and works to translate these values into practice in its structure, governance, and activities. [...] 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. We hope to have more conversations with other feminists about building alternative economies in our region and in the global south. We hope that eventually, these conversations will result in more feminist cooperatives, more solidarity, more resistance – loudly and unapologetically. We want to build connections with other collectives."<sup>89</sup>

Dammeh's approach to intersectionality grounds analysis within a material framing that looks at capital and production, as well as dialectical relations between capitalism, gender, race and other social categories. This approach echoes Marxist feminist Silvia Federici's attempt to trace the relations between capitalism, imperialism and gender<sup>90</sup>. She works on international organizations that use gender programming to impose austerity measures. This approach is reflected within Dammeh's vision to build an alternative model for organizing that is independent from external funding due to the damage that the latter creates (through dependency, compromise of political agendas, measurements of social change on the basis of reporting and indicators that consume time and provide little useful returns, etc.). This feminist analysis reflects debates within other movements from the global South, and centers the debate on social class, colonialism and imperialism within capitalism, as well as on how they impact race, nation and gender to produce specific class structures<sup>91</sup>. For Dammeh's members, colonialism is inherent to capitalism. Thus, they present a double affirmation: on the one hand, they see gender as one

<sup>85</sup> Jamil, Rabih, and Daou, Bernadette, "A feminist analysis of social entrepreneurship in the MENA region", Forthcoming.

<sup>86</sup> Yasmine, Rola; Sukkar, Batoul, "In the Pursuit of Reproductive Justice in Lebanon", *Kohl Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 2 | Winter 2018 Centralizing Reproductive Justice.

<sup>87</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/14/time-is-running-out-for-syrians-in-lebanon/?fbclid=IwAR3f-aZE6FX09LBJnin8-WUdroTQh0aH5uWXgGgbVAqeBlbNOdqYyiOyHU>

<sup>88</sup> Dammeh Cooperative, "For a Just Economy, Let's Take Back the Future! Dammeh Cooperative's manifesto for alternative economies," *Kohl magazine*, Vol. 5 No. 2 | Summer 2019, <https://kohljournal.press/dammeh-manifesto>, (last accessed on September 16th, 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Federici, Silvia, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press / Kairos, 2018,

<sup>91</sup> Talpade Mohanty, Chandra, 2013, "Transnational feminist crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique." *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4: 967-991. Al-Ali, Nadje, "Gendering Reconstruction: Iraqi Women between Dictatorship, Wars, Sanctions and Occupation." *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4-5, pp 739- 758, 2005 Routledge. Ahmed, Leila, 1992, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

of the several sources of oppression against women, and on the other hand, they critique the economist-centric Marxist approach that sees race and gender as secondary social relations within the capitalist system.

## Conclusion

The Lebanese feminist movement has two specificities: first, its matrix consists of a national movement, from independence to the liberation of the South; second, as feminist claims are appropriated by men, a new separatist trend is being propelled. For these reasons, we have endeavored to account for these specificities by placing the Lebanese feminist movements in a more general theoretical framework, highlighting the evolution of the demands from civil liberties to bodily rights and reproductive/social justice.

The first wave, which has emerged within the Republic, was spearheaded by women from the Lebanese bourgeoisie, who enjoyed a high level of education. The main slogan of their struggle was 'the end of colonialism'. In this nationalist perspective, they claimed their right to vote and to participate in political life. These Lebanese pioneers of feminism were generally quite far from the concerns of the working classes. Two main organizations were present at that time, thus materializing the dominant sectarian division. It was only after the various demonstrations against the first electoral law of 1951 that denied women's participation in political life, that these two organizations merged under the single banner of the Lebanese Council of Women. However, the approach of the new council refused to alter the religious status quo. The political action of women of that generation has indeed received the blessing of sectarian political leaders, and has taken place under their supervision. In short, this was the wave of "male feminism", dominated by sectarian leaders, and relatively disconnected from the popular base.

The period following the disintegration of nationalism in Arab countries and their development projects reflected the transition from a nationalist form of feminism to a leftist one. The second wave emerged especially within leftist and nationalist political parties. Women organizations appeared only as appendages to partisan organizations, much like youth organizations. The cause of women was secondary, fading behind the cause of national liberation. Feminists of this generation were controlled and monitored by their male counterparts, who were leading the parties. After the defeat of 1967

and the questioning of dominant ideologies (Arab Nasserite nationalism, Baathist, pro-Palestinian and other), these feminists had access to the literature of feminist movements in Europe and the United States, reinforcing a certain intellectual and academic elitism that is disconnected from the fate/reality of Lebanese women. The lack of political discourse crystallized at the beginning of the civil war and with the transformation of the women activism work into humanitarian efforts, without effective protests against warlords.

The third wave has started in the early 1990s, prior to the preparations for the Beijing conference. This period favored a more advanced "NGOization" and professionalization of feminist associations. Priorities were thus set by donors, while rivalries and competition created new schisms. The elitism that characterizes the history of feminism in Lebanon was also present in this generation of experts who gained knowledge of a specific vocabulary.

The fourth wave has emerged around a new left and post-colonial movement, which resulted in the inception of Helem (LGBT movement). It stemmed from women's perceptions regarding the social paradigm resulting from the oppression of women by the patriarchal and religious system. The fourth wave focused on the queer identity of women from middle and upper classes who had access to private education (i.e. graduates of major universities such as AUB, USJ or LAU), leading to the creation of *Nasawiya*. Like their predecessors, the new generation of feminists continued to operate in elite circles.

Is it, therefore, possible to speak of the failure of the feminist utopia in Lebanon? It would be simplistic to deduce this conclusion from the history of the formation of feminist organizations. Certainly, the lobbying strategies with legislative, administrative and judicial institutions are confined by the Lebanese state's reservations to CEDAW. Reservations affect the essence of feminine existence: the right of women to control their own bodies. However, the mismanagement strategies of waste have sparked an unprecedented mobilization in 2015 around issues of public policy and health. Despite the leakage of patriarchal and oppressive practices inside the movement, feminist grassroots organizing has been on the rise since then. Collectives like the Feminist Bloc, the Socialist Feminist Collective, and Dammeh cooperative are promoting new ways of organizing, while putting feminist knowledge production, women bodies and experiences of patriarchy, and social/reproductive

justice at the center of their efforts. This transformation of the Lebanese feminist mobilization was partly induced by the rise of social movements throughout the Arab region and the proliferation of initiatives on bodily rights and everyday struggles.

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# Youth Activism on Behalf of Gender, Sexual Health, Sexuality, Bodily Rights and Marginalized (GSBM) Groups in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>

Janine A. Clark<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Lebanon's and the MENA region's first aboveground lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) organization, *Helem* (the Arabic acronym for Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders and the word 'dream' in Arabic), was officially established in 2004. In the 15 years since, a diverse array of organizations and collectives dealing with gender, sexual health, sexuality, bodily rights and/or marginalized groups (referred to as GSBM) have come to the fore. The growth of these organizations/collectives can be attributed to international, regional and domestic factors. Yet, while the creation of Helem was triggered by international and regional events, its establishment, as well as the establishment of other GSBM organizations/collectives, must be understood within the Lebanese context. The trajectories of other social movements within Lebanon, including the youth movement, anti-war and anti-globalization movement, and the women's movement – to which the GSBM organizations/collectives belong and/or respond – provide an important background for understanding the history of GSBM organizations/collectives. Within this larger framework, the establishment and diversity of organizations/collectives is the outcome of decisive philosophical, political and strategic discussions and debates within the activist community itself, beginning with those debated within Helem. We can understand the richness of today's GSBM organizations/collectives as emerging out of generational differences but also intertwined philosophical, political and strategic differences, organizational structure, donor funding, and feminism.

This report outlines the historical trajectory of GSBM organizations/collectives in Lebanon. It is divided into three sections. It begins by placing GSBM organizations/collectives within the larger framework of youth activism in Lebanon, followed by a look at the establishment of Helem in the post-war era. The paper then examines

the year 2006, and specifically the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, as a critical juncture in terms of i) Helem's increased role and integration into youth activism; ii) the surfacing of internal debates and, eventually, splits within Helem that were largely, but not solely, triggered by the anti-war and anti-globalization movement; and iii) the creation of queer feminist collectives in response to events and developments in Helem and in Lebanon's women's movement. The report concludes with a discussion of GSBM organizations'/collectives' strategies and successes, followed by brief concluding remarks.

## 1. Youth Activism in Lebanon

many youth have become actively engaged in political life and identifies three types of youth engagement: 1) the conformists; 2) youth who participate in alternative non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and 3) the progressive activists (p. 76). The latter two are directly relevant to understanding GSBM organizations/collectives. The second group comprises youth who participated in the Independence Intifada of 2005 and subsequently mobilised in issue-based or rights-based NGOs, presenting themselves as viable alternatives to the corrupt elite. The third are youth who started to organize in loose campaigns and coalitions in 2006, following the Israeli war on Lebanon, and are more radical in their demands and methods (Harb, 2018, p. 80-81). While co-existing, these forms of activism mark a shift from traditional NGOs to more amorphous forms of mobilization that rely on "horizontal ways of engagement, with multiple leaders and loose organisational systems, where social media play an important role in communication and decision-making" (Harb, 2018, p. 75). GSBM organizations/collectives reflect these categories and transformations; Helem can be said to be originally part of the post-war generation of youth activism while queer feminist collectives emerged as part of the progressive youth mobilizations. Moreover, GSBM organizations/collectives played a leading role in this shift in youth mobilization.

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<sup>2</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the help of Georges Azzi, Sophie Chamas, Maya el Helou, Mona Harb, Ghassan Makarem, Tarek Zeidan and the many activists who were generous with their time and knowledge in the researching and writing of this report.

### Post-War Youth Activism: The Creation of Helem

Lebanese youth groups have a long history of political mobilization – primarily along religious, family and class lines – dating back to the early twentieth century (Harb, 2018, p. 75). Prior to the 1975 civil war, an increasing number of civil society organizations were interest-based and multi-confessional; however, the 1975 war rendered many of them inoperable. Following the war, there was a resurgence of interest-based organizations, and youth joined a variety of NGOs dealing with issues, such as environmental protection, disability rights and democratic elections (Harb, 2018, p. 83). Helem was formally established during the latter part of this post-war era. Its roots, however, date back to 1998 when increased internet access allowed for the establishment of queer social groups, such as the Gay Lebanon forum and mailing list and the underground group, Club Free, an informal association established in 1999 that focussed on social and cultural work on sexual orientation (Makarem, 2011, p. 102; Saleh, 2015, p. 368). As these small, informal groups began to organize events, such as an art exhibit or film club, to draw attention to the struggles they faced – in particular, the ongoing and chronic mistreatment by the police – and raise awareness regarding issues of sexuality and gender identity, their demands were taken up by human rights and other organizations. One example was *Hurriyat Khassa* (Private Liberties), a legal organization examining penal code reform. A variety of leftist groups also began supporting the cause.

While the internet offered a space for connecting and debating, it was the Egyptian 2001 Queen Boat affair – a Central Security Forces raid on a touristic disco boat moored in Cairo known to be popular among gay men – that triggered the establishment of Helem (Saleh, 2015, p. 368). The arrest and torture of 52 men produced outrage across the region but had particular resonance in Lebanon as, shortly after the raid, the government attempted to change Lebanon's penal code, including Article 534, which states that "Any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature is punishable by imprisonment for up to one year". Had these attempts been successful, they would have increased the scope of the Article by making its wording more ambiguous (Makarem, 2011, p. 104). In the context of rising protests against the US invasion of Iraq (2003), members of Club Free and other groups decided it was time to establish an aboveground organization – Helem – that would directly engage in the political sphere (Saleh, 2015, p. 368).

Helem was officially established after five of its members submitted a Letter of Notification to the Ministry of Interior (Mol) (National Aids Control Programme, 2008, p. 15). With no formal rejection received from the Mol within the required time limit, Helem was legally allowed to operate. However, it did not receive (and still has not) an official registration number; without it, Helem is unable to open up a bank account or possess a recognized legal identity – this continues to impede its ability to receive donor money.

Helem opened as a rights-based organization; it situated itself within the global human rights movement in terms of discourse and pursued a strategy of visibility or 'coming out' – it was and remains the only self-declared LGBTIQ organization in Lebanon. Its primary goal was the elimination of all forms of stigma and discrimination against the LBGT community and, in particular, reform of Article 534. Most egregious were (and continue to be) the anal and penile examinations to which police forcibly subjected suspected homosexuals in order to prove sodomy and, consequently, guilt (Saghieh, 2009, p. 49-50).

Soon after its registration, Helem opened a community center in Zico House, a cultural space in Beirut, in order to provide services. Its activities were threefold: 1) health, including counselling and HIV/AIDS testing, free psychological support and a referral system for the LGBTIQ community, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention outreach programs, and a helpline; 2) awareness, including publications and media relations; and, 3) advocacy.

## 2. 2006 as a Critical Juncture: The Creation of Samidoon and Helem's Increased Role and Integration into Youth Activism

As noted above, 2006, the year of Israel's war on Lebanon, was a pivotal moment in youth mobilization including GSBM mobilization. As of 2005 and the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, youth activists began engaging more in issue-based politics; this trend deepened after the 2006 war as "youth activism appear[ed] to be reclaiming its pre-war legacy, away from sectarianism, militarization and professionalism" (Harb, 2018, p. 76). In the years following the 2006 war, activists – particularly "feminist and LGBTIQ groups who are openly transnational and radical" – consolidated

what Harb calls progressive activism both in terms of its critique of the sectarian-based political system and in the methods and modes of organizing and collective action (p. 76). Samidoun – in which Helem played a leading role – provided an important model for post-2006 youth mobilization.

When Israel invaded in July 2006, Helem was one of the first organizations to react to Israeli aggression by becoming part of the massive grassroots solidarity movement, Samidoun, that developed during the attacks. Similar to the abovementioned alternative NGOs which sought to change the sectarian-based political system, Samidoun worked across sectarian lines. Yet Samidoun was a network or coalition of anti-war activists, environmentalists, student groups, collectives and Palestinian refugee associations, not an NGO. From Helem's centre in ZICO house, Samidoun brought together and coordinated aid efforts, organized the collection and distribution of food and clothing, and provided counselling to largely Shi'a refugees fleeing from south Lebanon. According to its own estimates, Samidoun attracted over 10,000 volunteers at its peak.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of its role in Samidoun, Helem became more embedded in youth activists' circles, attaining a greater level of acceptance. As Nader and Zaatari (2014) point out "Helem members and others were giving media interviews, working on the ground with people, and fundraising" (p. 102). Samidoun gave Helem a high degree of visibility that played an important role in establishing greater legitimacy of GSBM activists. Quoting one of Nader and Zaatari's interlocutors: "Helem was an essential part of the Samidoun network. And a lot of people knew that there were a lot of very openly queer people working with them, and a queer organization working with them on relief and stuff like that, and ... that helped mainstream that, and helped give Helem a lot of legitimacy ..." (p. 103).

The importance of Samidoun and of Helem's role therein for GSBM activism and youth activism more generally cannot be underestimated. As Nader and Zaatari (2014) state, the 2006 Israeli invasion "created new opportunities for organizing, outreach, and collaboration among activist groups" (p. 102). While traditional social and political institutions were unwilling or unable to provide services during the war, the invasion "opened up opportunities for new social and political organizers. The events in 2006

necessitated that a new generation of activists take the lead" (p. 102).

Samidoun became a model for a new type of collective action based on loose coalitions. In this vein, Samidoun paved the way for what can be regarded as the culmination of progressive activism, the unprecedented 2015 YouStink! protests. The YouStink! protests broke out against a municipal landfill crisis that soon mobilized citizens around the message that the real stink came from the corruption and incompetence of the country's politicians. Led by a group calling itself YouStink!, a network of coalitions known as *al-Hirak* (the movement) took to the streets that was comprised of NGO experts and activists, including civil rights activists, leftist and communist party actors, actors from other campaigns, such as the We Want Accountability campaign, new leftist collectives such as *Al-Shaab Yurid* (The People Want), and GSBM activists.

The collectives and campaigns that comprised al-Hirak were distinguished by the fact that many of them, beginning with 2006 and Samidoun, "had been experimenting for a few years with a range of tools and modes of action, and were learning from each other ..." (Harb, 2018, p. 88). Unlike more typical NGOs and forms of collective action, the new progressive activist groups had open-ended, flexible setups that enabled them to discuss issues openly, they avoided donor funding and sought crowdfunding as a means of fundraising, and, importantly, they tended not to have a specific leader. Rejecting the hierarchical structure of traditional NGOs, many new activist groups sought to create "horizontal forms of shared leadership, where decision-making was done collectively ..." (Harb, 2018, p. 88). Many of the leading activists in these discussion and processes following 2006 were young women and members of GSBM groups (Harb, 2018, p. 88).

### **The Anti-war and Anti-Globalization Movement and the Surfacing of Internal Debates within Helem**

The trajectory of Lebanon's GSBM organizations and collectives also must be put in the context of the anti-imperialist movement dominated by the radical left. The year 2006 also was a defining moment in that Helem's participation in Samidoun exacerbated intersecting tensions over political ideologies, the relationship between single issue activism and the anti-imperialist struggle, and class.

<sup>3</sup> Samidoun representative, interview, Beirut, 9 April 2008.



While Club Free initiated the creation of Helem, several different currents were influential in its creation. In addition to Club Free, which was largely dominated by professional circles, and Hurriyat Khassa, were groups such as *Khatt Moubashar* (Direct Line), a radical leftist group that focused on engagement in the cultural sphere, and independent (non-establishment) leftist groups that joined or were strong allies of Helem (Makarem, 2011, p. 107; Rizk and Makarem, 2015, p. 97).

Much of Helem's membership agreed that sexual liberation could neither be achieved through imperialism nor be detached from the wider struggle for democracy. Thus, in addition to its focus on LGBTIQ issues, Helem adopted an anti-sectarian, anti-racist and anti-xenophobic position and focused on social work from its inception (Makarem, 2011, p. 105). Helem's early leadership sought to firmly establish Helem within civil society by "identifying platforms for common action with other NGOs in the country..." (Moumneh, 2008, p. 41).

However, Helem's political engagement with the national struggle in the form of Samidoun and the consequent opening of Helem's doors to refugees in 2006 exacerbated tensions over the relationship or balance between an identity rights-based approach to activism and one focused on larger struggles for political, and, for some in the organization, revolutionary change. While the former approach is focused firstly on LGBTIQ rights while articulating solidarity with other causes, the latter prioritizes the shared struggle against oppression over the struggle for rights that are perceived to be at the expense of others. These tensions intersected with differences over political ideology, as it was largely the radical left that rejected a rights-based approach to activism. Compounding these disputes were class issues. As Helem's focus on social work grew, greater numbers of socio-economically poorer and often uneducated members joined the organization. This triggered debates over the degree to which Helem should be focused on the needs of the poor. As a consequence, many members who were from the upper middle class left Helem (Nader and Zaatari, 2014, p. 103); others left to seek alternatives that were more ideologically political than Helem.

These tensions, among others, eventually led to the creation (and, in some cases, break-away) of several organizations: the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE) that supports sexuality, gender and bodily rights' movements in the MENA through capacity building, knowledge production, exchange, and security

and emergency response (2010); Marsa, a sexual health centre and service provider (2011); LebMASH (Lebanese Medical Association for Sexual Health), an organization of healthcare professionals that seeks to advance sexual and reproductive health (2012); and Mosaic (2014), an organization of activists and legal and health experts which provides services for marginalized groups, advocates for policy reform, builds knowledge and capacities on sexual orientation and gender identity issues, and fights against human rights violations. The idea for AFE originated in Helem and is based on the networks that Helem created throughout the MENA region (see below). Helem's abovementioned clinic evolved into a separate organization, Marsa. LebMASH was created by many of the healthcare professional who worked in Helem. One of the founders of Mosaic is a former director of Helem. Some of this multiplication was due to a natural evolution of Helem's activities; from its inception, Helem's clinic was intended to be a separate entity. In other cases, such as LebMASH, activists were inspired by new types of organizing from abroad. However, at the very least, the abovementioned tensions played an important role in the timing of these NGOs' creation.

Helem itself also went through a transformation. It moved to a new location, restructured, and, without abandoning its focus on legislative change (see below), reoriented its focus on community building and mobilization, legal and social services, human rights violation monitoring and reporting, labour law reform, economic empowerment, and public awareness raising.

### **The Women's Movement and the Creation of Queer Feminist Collectives**

2006 was also a pivotal year in that it led to the creation of Meem, Lebanon's first queer feminist group. Meem emerged out of Helem Girls, a support group within Helem, the creation of which was in response to women's experiences of patriarchy and sexism in Helem. Helem Girls/Meem also are reflective of queer feminists' frustration and disappointment with Lebanon's third wave of feminism. Post-war women's activism – third wave feminism – was strongly focused on achieving the goals of the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women, often in partnership with the state's National Commission for Lebanese Women (Daou, 2015, p. 60). Consequently, the structures of the NGOs focused on the requirements of international donors, increasing competition between women's rights NGOs for donor funding. The women's rights discourse furthermore increasingly focused on

rights and the reform of existing laws (Daou, 2015, p. 60). Meem marks the beginnings of a fourth wave of feminism. Indeed, Lebanon's fourth wave of feminism emerged out of queer feminism.

Women began withdrawing from Helem in 2006 with the creation of Helem Girls. The limited representation of women in decision-making positions and the prioritization of gay male issues and activities over women's, at that time, led the women in Helem to seek a space outside of Zico House that centred on women's experiences, and "derived its strategies from feminist politics ..." (Moussawi, 2015, p. 602).

In 2007, the core membership of Helem Girls left Helem and created Meem. More women and numerous men left the organization in 2012 due to the inadequate response by Helem's then leadership to a sexual harassment case that took place in Zico House (Saleh, 2015, p. 369).

Meem was not only created as an alternative non-male-dominated space but also one with different organizing strategies and organizational structure (Moussawi, 2015, p. 602). Rejecting the affirmative strategies and the organizational hierarchies of both Helem and the post-war women's organizations (Moussawi, 2015, p. 602), Meem did not have a governing board but adopted a non-hierarchical structure that was to reflect fourth wave feminism. Meem furthermore rejected the visibility of Helem and chose to go underground, focusing on feminist issues, empowerment and community-building (Moussawi, 2015, p. 599).

Yet, as Nader and Zaatari (2014) note, the creation of Meem is also directly related to the 2006 war; the process of doing relief work became entangled in the process through which new feminist and GSBM collectives were either formed or consolidated and new feminist and GSBM visions emerged (p. 104). Existing NGOs did not allow their people to support the resistance during the war, even though many wanted to, and this "opened up the space for groups like Helem and Meem or other new groups that started forming - a new generation of activists that during the war, were able to take the lead" (p. 104). Feminists and queers with left-leaning approaches or ones that aimed to dismantle multiple intersecting social injustices simultaneously opened new organizations (Nader and Zaatari, 2014, p.105). *Nasawiyya* (the precursor of which was the Feminist Collective, an electronic platform for publishing issues related to the situation of women in Lebanon), which was

created after Meem, and *Dammeh* are feminist, leftist organizations and they belong to the new anti-war and anti-globalization movement, distancing themselves from the traditional left and traditional feminists (Daou, 2015, p. 60-61).

Thus, coming out of queer feminism, the fourth wave of feminism in Lebanon is more articulated around the social role of gender, the struggle against male oppression and patriarchy. While Meem no longer exists, collectives, such as *Dammeh* (and, previously, Meem), tackle issues such as sexual identity, bodily rights and sexual liberation - issues that had not been adequately addressed prior to the establishment of Meem (Mitri, 2015, p. 91). In their organizational structures, mobilizing strategies and foci, they strive to stand in contrast both to the traditional feminist and women's groups and also Helem.

Today, the field of GSBM activism is not just populated by NGOs that include Helem and AFE (which have the greatest public face locally and internationally), and MARSА, LebMASH, and Mosaic, but also by collectives - unregistered groups - such as *Dammeh*, all of which are dominated (not necessarily exclusively) by queer feminists and by and large seek a less visible presence and to focus on issues such as empowerment and community-building. In addition to these overlapping and interacting spheres of activism, are activists who work outside of an organization or group, directly dealing with GSBM and expressing their activism through art, performance and other media. These would include Haven for Artists and Kohl, the latter of which is a queer feminist journal; they lie beyond the scope of this report.

### 3. Strategies and Successes

GSBM organizations and collectives have very different goals, ranging from legal change to healthcare to community-building and societal awareness. While their strategies can differ quite greatly, most of the organizations share some common strategic approaches, even if implemented differently. These include networking and coalition-building, engaging state actors, advocacy, campaigns, creating safe spaces, and community activities. Focusing on empowerment, consciousness-raising, community-building and - depending on the collective - societal awareness, collectives choose very different strategies than NGOs, yet they too share some of these common strategies.

### Networking and Coalitions

Coalition-building is central to most of the NGOs' strategies; most GSBM NGOs try to work closely with other civil society organizations. Mosaic, for example, works with the ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality for some of its gender workshops. These coalitions reflect activists' fundamental philosophy that groups are stronger, louder and more effective if they work together.

Helem's coalition-building began even prior to its creation. Several Club Free members had worked as members of *Soins Infirmiers et Développement Communautaire* (SIDC), one of the original NGOs to be trained by the Department of Health's National AIDS Program (NAP), which, in turn, trained other NGOs and volunteers in HIV/AIDS-related issues and programmes. Based on its successful work as part of SIDC, Helem was brought in as a full partner in NAP soon after it was created. Its work with the network enabled it to prove itself as a "valid, credible partner of Lebanese society."<sup>4</sup>

Today, Helem's coalitions reflect a committed intersectional approach. It is part of labour reform coalitions and labour unions and has active partnerships and alliances with the worker's rights movements, migrant worker rights movement, disability rights movements, and feminist movements.

AFE engages in a different type of coalition-building – the creation of regional networks and coalitions. The idea for AFE was originally developed in Helem based on the large number of calls from individuals around the MENA region seeking help and advice. Today, AFE plays an important regional role in activist training, helping activists and individuals stay in contact, and in exchanging information, strategies and experiences. Its annual flagship conference of individuals and activists from the region is not only a place where participants can share their experiences, successes and failures, but also where new collectives and coalitions are created.

Queer feminist collectives have formed a feminist bloc that includes feminist groups such as Dammeh, the AUB Gender and Sexuality Club, and Fe-male (a feminist collective working to empower women and girls and eliminate discrimination). The bloc, a network of approximately 25 groups, organizations and clubs, has largely taken over some roles that were once held exclusively by the traditional (third wave) women's organizations. Numerous NGOs, including Kafa

(Enough) Violence and Exploitation, Helem, and the Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering, participated in the 2018 International Women's Day march. Yet it was the feminist bloc, and not the larger traditional women's NGOs, such as Kafa, that organized it and subsequently invited Kafa and ABAAD to join. While not the first time that transwomen took to the streets, the 2018 women's day march was the first-time transwomen marched to demand their rights as a group; due to organizational priorities and funding issues, this would not have occurred under the leadership of Kafa or ABAAD.

Coalition-building thus lies at the heart of all GSBM NGOs and collectives. GSBM NGOs coordinate events together and are currently trying to create a network with human rights, feminist and migrant organizations with the aim of framing their joint advocacy around freedom of expression (OutRight, 2018, p. 32).

### Working with State Actors: Formally and Informally

Most GSBM NGOs work formally and/or informally with state actors. Organizations, such as Marsa and LebMASH, which deal with service delivery and specific projects, actively seek formal relations with the state. LebMASH, for example, works with the mental health unit of the Ministry of Health and currently has a project with the Ministry to create a mental health training manual for physicians. In contrast, Helem – a primary goal of which is legislative change – seeks to work in an informal capacity. Responding to the challenges presented by the country's consociational system, Helem typically relies on private meetings with relevant judicial actors.

Lebanon's consociational political system, as a result of the consensus it demands, favours policy stasis over reform. When reforms to the Constitution or state law have occurred (all of which, in the post-war era, have been minor), it was only because they were not threatening to confessional elites and/or the latter could see some benefit to the reform (see Kingston, 2008, 2013). Political parties, furthermore, generally are averse to supporting any causes that may risk their respective religious authority's support, even in the face of large public demand for policy reform and/or movement strength.

Yet, while the political system is relatively impervious to the consensus required for de jure reform, it offers organizations access to the state officials which can

<sup>4</sup> MEEM representative, interview, 20 May 2010, Beirut.

result in de facto reform. As an interim strategy, given the near impossibility of legislative reform under the current political system, Helem typically seeks to 'neutralize' Article 534 and focuses its efforts on judges and lawyers – as opposed to politicians or parties – to do so. Working together with Legal Agenda, a groundbreaking group of lawyers that addresses the issues of marginalized groups in court and through research and publications, Helem thus 'lobbies' general prosecutors and judges, approaching them for one-on-one meetings when an incident, such as an arrest, occurs. In the process, it provides informal training on gender and sexuality and teaches judges that homosexuality is not 'contrary to the order of nature' with the goal of having the case thrown out or receiving a light sentence. Helem furthermore requests that if any cases come before the judges that they contact it. This work has evolved to informal roundtables with judges.

### Advocacy and Campaigns

As the 2018 OutRight report delineates, GSBM NGOs have consistently engaged in advocacy with UN mechanisms, including the United Nations General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (p. 32). In collaboration with Legal Agenda, Helem prepared the 2017 Shadow Report for the Human Rights Committee, documenting arrests and cases of discrimination and violence. GSBM collectives also lobby at MENA women's rights conferences (Moussawi, 2015, p. 604).

Most GSBM NGOs engage in campaigns, responding largely to specific events such as the 2012 arrest of 36 men at a cinema, all of whom were subjected to forced anal examinations, and the 2014 arrest of 28 men at a hammam (bathhouse) (OutRight, 2018, p. 25). In response to the former, Helem launched the campaign called "Tests of Shame" – the first to bring anal tests to the public's attention. In 2016, LebMASH organized a video campaign, "What is the Cause?", to dispel medical myths surrounding homosexuality. In 2017, it also launched the MENA region's first National LGBT Health Week. Primarily targeting doctors, healthcare workers and medical students, the theme of the most recent LGBT Health Week (2019) was "Excellence without Discrimination", emphasizing excellence in health care without any form of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Marsa has launched several video campaigns relating to sexual health and misconceptions. In another of many examples, in 2018,

AFE, in conjunction with Human Rights Watch (HRW), launched the "No Longer Alone" campaign – featuring video-clips of LGBTIQ activists from the MENA region describing their journeys of self-acceptance. Recently (2019), Helem and Mosaic, together with HRW, launched a campaign to end systematic discrimination against transgender women.

As part of its focus on public awareness, Helem gives talks and media appearances and holds public activities such as those centred on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) (Moussawi, 2015, p. 604). Helem has hosted IDAHOT events since 2005 when it held talks, photography exhibits, and art shows all under the umbrella of fighting homophobia (Moussawi, 2015, p. 604). In 2017, Beirut held its first Beirut Pride. In 2018, Gay Pride week involved a number of local restaurants/bars that openly flew rainbow flags. An Islamist group issued threats during the 2017 events and, in 2018, a co-organizer of the event was arrested, resulting in most of the events being cancelled.

Helem's committees also have launched their own campaigns. Helem's Trans Committee launched its first campaign in 2017 and participated in the abovementioned 2018 women's march. A core aspect of Helem is the volunteer committee system whereby it creates activists.

### Safe Spaces and Community Activities

Both Helem and GSBM collectives have safe spaces with activities for their members. Helem's space is devoted to discussions and events for a wide variety of members from the community including refugees and sex workers. Helem's committees – the newly re-created Helem Girls or the Trans Committee, for example – use the centre to discuss and plan activities, such as campaigns. Helem's centre is also a space for those who need a place to escape, rest or meet others.

GSBM collectives focus on women's empowerment and community-building. Meem presented "itself as 'a community of lesbian, bisexual, queer women and transgender persons (including male-to-female and female-to-male) in addition to women questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity' ..." (Moussawi, 2015, p. 604). Similarly, Dammeh defines itself as a cooperative created for women and trans people to develop, sustain and practice politics of social, economic, environmental and gender justice in order to influence political, cultural, social, and economic

structures. Much like Meem had, Dammeh has a centre, the address of which is not published, that acts as “a safe space in Lebanon where queer women and transgender persons can meet, talk, discuss issues, share experiences, and work on improving their lives and themselves” (Moussawi, 2015, p. 604).

All the NGOs and collectives offer numerous activities for the community. These range from training, education, self-care and therapy to movie nights, parties and communal dinners. Mosaic, for example, organizes a range of community activities in order to break down barriers between the different LGBTIQ communities. It offers drama and art therapy for LGBTIQ individuals and singing classes and English courses for transgender women, and it uses language training and art therapy to create dialogue between Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi LGBTIQ (OutRight, 2018, p. 31).

### **Successes, Legal Victories, Awareness and Political Change**

Despite the continued existence of Article 534, homophobia and lesbophobia, and the arbitrary arrests of non-normative individuals, particularly trans people, GSBM NGOs' and collectives' successes are numerous and noteworthy.

In terms of Helem's and Legal Agenda's efforts to neutralize Article 534, there have been six cases that judges have thrown out (OutRight, 2018, p. 21, 28-30). Activists achieved an important victory with Judge Mounir Suleiman's landmark ruling that consensual homosexual relations are not against nature and thus the accused should not be prosecuted under Article 534. In 2014, relying on Suleiman's 2009 ruling, Judge Najj al-Dahdah cleared a transgender woman of having a same-sex relationship with a man. In 2016, Judge Hisham Kantar similarly refused to apply Article 534, citing the previous rulings and also incorporating arguments related to freedom of expression. In 2017, Judge Tabiaa Maalouf threw out a case based on Article 183, which states that no act is a criminal act if it is exercised within a natural right; given that homosexuality is a natural right, he argued, Article 534 could not be applied. He furthermore based his argument on freedoms of expression. In addition to these rulings, in 2018, a criminal court of appeal upheld the 2017 ruling and, in 2020, for the first time, a military tribunal judge acquitted four soldiers of committing sexual acts against nature. LebMASH's work with the Lebanese Psychological Association and Lebanese Psychiatric Society (LPS) led to the issuing of statements stating that homosexuality

is not a mental illness and that misguided attempts to change sexual orientation are futile and potentially harmful (OutRight, 2018, p. 21, 27). In 2015, the LPS issued an addendum demanding the abolishment of Article 534.

With support from the media and public and various initiatives, including sit-ins outside the Ministry of Justice and the Lebanese Order of Physicians, Helem's advocacy campaign has led to a marked reduction in anal testing; in Beirut, with rare exceptions, physicians no longer cooperate with the police. In 2012, both the Lebanese Order of Physicians and the Minister of Justice issued circulars calling for an end to the practice (OutRight, 2018, p. 21, 26).

The GSBM NGOs furthermore have had successes at the United Nations. In 2017, the Human Rights Committee's Concluding Observations recognized the arrests, violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ individuals and called on Lebanon to de-criminalize consensual same-sex relations and protect the rights of LGBTIQ people (OutRight, 2018, p. 33).

The Lebanese parliamentary elections of 2018 furthermore marked the first time some candidates openly discussed the elimination of Article 534.

At the level of health awareness, as well as media and societal awareness, the LGBTIQ community has had noteworthy successes in the field of health. Marsa provides sexual health education in several private universities (OutRight, 2018, p. 27-28).

Historically, the common Arabic term for homosexual has been the word *shaadh* (deviant). Both Helem and Meem have lobbied the media for the usage of new Arabic terms when referring to homosexuality. A large number of Lebanese newspapers now use the neutral term *mithli* (same sex) (Moussawi, 2015, p. 607).

In 2009, Meem launched its book, *Bareed Musta3jil* (Mail in a Hurry or Fast Mail). Receiving international attention, the book is a collection of queer, lesbian, bisexual and trans Arab women's personal narratives. Today, *Bareed Mista3jil* is being used for staged readings and in university curricula (OutRight, 2018, p. 30). Before Meem, activism was primarily done by traditional women's rights organizations, which were not always inclusive of queer and transwomen. Although transphobia, in particular, continues to exist within the women's rights and the GSBM activist

scene, Meem “raised the bar, and now homophobic and transphobic discourses are not accepted among women’s rights NGOs” (OutRight, 2018, p. 30).

### **Concluding Remarks**

GSBM organizations and collectives play an integral and leading role in Lebanon’s youth mobilization. GSBM activism is also ‘young’, less than 15 years of age. During these relatively few years, GSBM activism has evolved and diversified significantly, reflecting the fact that GSBM organizations/collectives are dynamic organizations changing in response in international, regional, local and organizational events and needs. Most importantly, GSBM organizations/collectives have emerged, distinguished themselves and internally evolved as a result of contested debates over whether or not they should be identity-based, their organizational structures and their relationships to other social movement organizations. These – often difficult – debates have given GSBM organizations/collectives their vibrancy and effectiveness. While Article 534, homophobia and transphobia continue to exist both in law and society, GSBM organizations/collectives are, without a doubt, agents of change.

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