

The Feminist Movement and Neoliberalism in Lebanon: A New Route to Explore

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The evolution of capitalism has reached its latest stage in neoliberalism, whereby the purpose of the state has shifted “from one that has a responsibility to ensure employment and protection for its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself” (Waller and Wrenn 2021). It has entrenched in its individuals the teachings of accountability and self-reliance whilst eroding the teachings of collectiveness and responsibility to others. The result has become an economy comprised of individuals pursuing rational choices based off the materials and information they’ve absorbed, and a society comprised of self-interested members seeking to forward their own agendas.

This paper will seek to extract different perspectives of neoliberalism that I, as an author, agree with, and match them with applications in the Arab World’s context. I had originally intended on exploring how specific policies unique to the neoliberal agenda, particularly the Lebanese neoliberal context, affect and, more specifically, hinder the feminist movement’s advancements. However, upon seeking to build my literature review, I learnt that delving into such a question is not as straightforward as I had hoped, considering the lack of “straightforward” data I expected to find. This past year, COVID-19 opened the world’s eyes to the fragile politico-economic world order that dominates us. The failure of many governments to provide for their citizens in times of lockdown and the severe supply chain disruption are only two broad points in the long list downsides to the capitalist system that the pandemic unveiled. Lebanon is an even more extreme case of the capitalist system as it practices a *predatorial* neoliberal economic system. What this has translated into is an almost total privatization of the sectors set to serve the public’s basic needs. I believe it is interesting for academia to investigate the how Lebanon’s extreme liberalitarianism embeds within its fabric unequal and discriminatory policies. For my part, I’d like to use this short paper as an opportunity to contribute to the conversation of neoliberalism and feminism in Lebanon.

As the dismantling of social protection built the novel premise that individuals have the capacity to fend for themselves, female empowerment programs, too, sought income generation, rather than collectiveness and solidarity, as a primary goal (Bahramitash 2018). In other words, such programs developed to instill in women the skills to seek jobs and start businesses independently in the set neoliberal structure. However, they became apolitical in that they failed to consider the lack of supporting infrastructure, such as (but not limited to) affordable childcare provisions or safe and accessible public transportation, which hindered women’s attempt at advancements in the first place.

This claim can find support in the Center for Inclusive Business and Leadership’s (CIBL) report on the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women in Arab MENA organizations. CIBL developed two indices—the KIP Index which “tracks local employer policies and practices regarding the recruitment, retention and promotion of women across sectors,” and the Lived

Experience Index which “tracks female citizen experiences of recruitment, retention, and promotion in the sectors within which they are currently employed”—to firstly unveil the “lived realities of formally employed female citizens,” and secondly recommend local employers with sector-based HR mechanisms to increase the wellbeing of its female employees (Moughalian and Ammar 2019). Of the report’s key findings was that, although the healthcare sector ranked highest in the KIP Index for 6 out of 11 Arab MENA countries, it was not able to sustain this rank for the Lived Experience Index. In fact, women reported both an inability to uphold a healthy work-life balance and “a reliance on their own social and immediate network for support with care work and other responsibilities outside the workplace” in the healthcare sector. This provides an example implying that the kind of empowerment programs seeking to teach women about different aspects of healthcare without considering the local context become effectively useless to the progress of women in this particular sector.

William Waller & Mary V. Wrenn, authors of *Feminist Institutionalism and Neoliberalism*, identify individual agency in free market operations as the central premise of the neoliberal narrative. They distinguish neoliberal agency from agency in general by stating that the former “constructs and instructs the superficially empowered individual and perpetuates the *illusion* of autonomous decision making” (Waller and Wrenn 2021). The illusion they are referring to is that of the individual’s potential for self-efficacy. The neoliberal narrative prides itself on the space it provides the individuals who select rational choices to change their situation and stations. However, it shies away from acknowledging the inequalities and discriminations that may arise as a result of individuals exploiting the system to serve their agendas. Thus, neoliberal agency, by nature and based off what the world has seen, does not entail an individual’s practice of full authenticity. An individual cannot be fundamentally authentic in the choices made if there are barriers imposed by the system and its institutions.

This claim can find support in Catherine Moughalian and Zeina Ammar’s 2019 report, *Feminist Movement Building in Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities*, which “seeks to provide learning around supporting feminist activism and movement building” in Lebanon. In analyzing the dynamics and trends that shape the movement, the authors identify five different obstacles the feminist movement in Lebanon faces. The first of these obstacles arises as a result of the general politico-socio-economic context and shrinking civic space which challenge activists’ ability to sustain their activism and continue organizing. The second of these obstacles relates to funding. Obtaining funding for groups within the movement poses another difficulty given that funds are limited, inflexible, and short-term. More established women’s rights organizations tend to receive the larger portion of the funding made available to the feminist movement in Lebanon than smaller radical-leaning groups. This results in fewer collaborative initiatives and more fragmented work. Considering the strict agendas that donors often impose, a collective stance in the face of donors’ demands could strengthen and solidify the movement’s impact in Lebanon. Thirdly, with funding distributed to a only few organizations via the connection of specific people, decision-making power tends to fall and remain in the hands of a few influential figures. As a result, less experienced activists or newcomers altogether tend to feel disempowered in making decisions that intend to serve the advancement of the movement. Lastly, much like all significant institutions, the movement is highly centralized in Beirut. From personal experience, the impact of this obstacle tends to give the impression that feminists do not exist outside of Beirut and Beirut is the only safe space for feminists in Lebanon.

Overall, the points brought up about the neoliberal agenda do not even begin to explore the different perspectives that already exist in the literature on neoliberalism. An extended version of this paper may investigate further perspectives of neoliberalism and find further applications relating to the feminist movement in Lebanon. It may also divide the paper up into sections pertaining to the impact of specific policies under the neoliberal regime on specific aspects of the feminist movement. There is much for the academic world to explore. What this paper has offered, however, is an introduction to a new line of thought in which one begins to draw parallels between the woman's daily burdens in Lebanon to the predatorial neoliberal nature of the economy. The long-term hope is for the feminist movement to unveil these parallels, communicate them with the public, and dismantle them so as to create a new economic model—one that is consistently friendly to all its members.

Works Cited

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