

They Called Her “Lady Liberty”:

On the Birth of a State Conceived in the Womb of the Lebanese Woman

Jasmin Lilian Diab

Feminist scholars have been tasked with the heavy burden of separating the *gender revolution* from namely, all “other” revolutions throughout scholarship and history. And this is important. It is important because work on *gender and revolution* has been a consistent attempt to mend the divisions between the feminist scholarship on *women and revolutions* and the more mainstream study of *revolutions* where the feminist and women’s agenda seems to take a back seat – or even more so, a seat at the back of the bus.

Traditionally, women’s roles have been emphasized as crucial to the course and outcome of revolutions throughout history; however, many feminist scholars argue that revolutionary movements, perhaps even intentionally, have a history of subordinating women’s interests to broader or more “fundamental” revolutionary goals. They further elaborate that revolutions and the states they yield have often continued to marginalize and exclude women from decision making, often enacting legislation that emphasized women’s more traditionally and “socially acceptable” family roles within the household.

On the other end of the stick, and in complete contrast to feminist scholarship, more mainstream studies of revolutions and their ideological agendas, were geared toward overlooking women and gender issues throughout their discourses and analysis. Their description and analyses of particular revolutions’ drives and consequences highlighted the social injustices which lie in the notions of economic standing, social class, state corruption, as well as regional and international conflicts. Even more *traditional* definitions of “revolution” throughout the discourse, such as that presented by Skocpol (1979) for example, is one that depicts revolution as a process which “[...] entailed a fast-paced foundational transformation of a society’s state and class structures, including institutions and property relations”.¹

Scholastic work on *gender and revolution* has been centered upon not just integrating gender analysis in the wider discipline of revolution, but also distinguishing revolutions by their gendered consequences and repercussions. It ultimately grew from the evident reality that *all* revolutions had most definitely involved the participation of women in ways that disordered pre-existing social constructions of gender and women’s roles. In her review of social revolutions and various Third World populist revolutions, Moghadam (2018) found

¹ Skocpol, T. (1979), *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 4- 41.

two *types* of revolutions and dissected their implications upon women and the gender rhetoric.

According to her research, one group of revolutions fell into the “women in the family” or patriarchal model of revolution; while the other group of revolutions fell under the women’s “emancipation”, or “egalitarian model of revolution”.² This differentiation is pivotal when we aim to understand the roles of women in revolutions, as it is important not to assume that “women” is a homogeneous group. It should be subsequently noted that in each revolution there has been variance in the outcomes it yielded, and continues to yield, upon women. This variance is strongly founded upon notions such as socio-economic standing, race, ethnicity as well as ideological divisions and other demographic considerations among women – especially in the MENA region. Nonetheless, revolutionary discourses and policies pertaining to women, the family and citizenship seem to fall into these two broad categories. So where will Lebanon’s fall?

According to Moghadam, the *women’s emancipation model* links both women’s liberation and rights to the revolution’s objectives, modernity, or the aim for social justice, development and overall transformation in a political and social system.³ It constructs *Woman* as a major component of citizenship. She is to be equipped for economic and political action. She is to be freed from gendered roles, patriarchal constructions and societal expectations for her own liberation and active realization of her complete citizenship. The rhetoric of this model is deeply rooted in *gender equality* rather than in *gender difference*.⁴ Historically, a clear example of this is that of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Although this revolution took place more than a century ago, it remains one of the most *revolutionary* revolutions of all time. Its bold and unparalleled approach to raising the legal status and social positions of women at the time still echoes in Russia to this day.⁵

On another note, the *women-in-the-family model* of revolution is one which discounts women from the developments in the definitions and constructions of the revolutionary ideology. Whether in the definition of *independence*, *liberation* and *liberty*, this model tends to maintain the notion of a woman as second-class citizen in complete contrast to the ideology which they promote.⁶ This model consequently bases its ideological rhetoric in patriarchal values, false notions of nationalism, as well as more traditional or religious depictions of an “ideal society”. It assigns women the conventional roles of wife and

² Moghadam, V. M. (2018), *Feminism and the Future of Revolutions, Socialism and Democracy*, Volume 32, Issue 1, pp. 31-53.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Goldberg Ruthchild, R. (2010), *Equality and Revolution*, University of Pittsburg Press, p. 147.

⁶ Ibid

mother, and associates women with the family unit, reproduction, *sex*, tradition, culture and religious connotations.

Although historically praised as the main accelerator in the development of republics and democracies, the 1789 French Revolution is also seen as the historical precursor of the patriarchal model. Despite its many progressive features, as well as the fact that several of its central documents, such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, continued to enthrone movements for abolitionism and universal suffrage in the next century, the French Revolution had an extremely conservative and traditionalist outcome for women. According to Darton (1989), women's primary duty in the Republic was biological reproduction and the socialization of children in the virtues of the republic.⁷

More recently, in twentieth-century across developing countries such Mexico (1910-1920), Algeria (1954-1962) and Iran (1978-1979) revolutions had quite evidently patriarchal outcomes for women. Women were consigned to the *private* domain despite the significant roles women had assumed in the aforementioned revolutionary movements. In cases where the *women-in-the-family* model applies, men assumed power and monopolized the decision-making process, putting legislation in place which codified patriarchal-gender relations, and set the women's movement back centuries. If we are to move a little closer in both time and geography, the Arab Spring revolutions in their *first wave*, put women on the back burner and the patriarchal model triumphed in countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.⁸

So what determines each type of revolution or democratic transition and its gender outcomes? Simple, the consistency in the upward transition in the roles of women prior, during and after this process. This is where the true importance of women's participation in the 2019 Lebanese Revolution lies. In answering this question, ideology and social structure are equally relevant. Often enough, where "revolutionaries" or the leadership of a transition are steered by a modernizing ideology, where reformist "leftist" parties are prominent, and chiefly where women and their organizations have had a strong presence, the aftermath of the revolution is more probably going to be emancipatory for gendered roles and structures.

In contrast, in the cases where these circumstances are not existing, and particularly where revolutions or political movements have been guided primarily without a strong female presence, *patriarchal* tendencies and ideologies are more likely to find new strength as a result. Despite momentary *distractions* throughout the period of the revolution, as women

⁷ Darton, R. (1995), *Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789-East Germany, 1989*, Representations No. 49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989, pp. 40-60.

⁸ Esfandiari, H. & Heideman, K. (2015), *The Role and Status of Women after the Arab Uprisings*, Strategic Sectors: Culture and Society, pp. 303-306.

participate in the demonstrations and protests, pre-conceived and instilled patriarchal gender dynamics are often carried over in the post-revolutionary period – as the voices of these women and the feminist agenda is sidetracked and overlooked in the quest for the “greater good”.

Moreover, in Lebanon, this is an opportune time to turn the tables on the formerly oppressed feminist agenda – one which remains unaddressed amid taping the women’s rights issue together by giving them their basic freedoms, as though these basic freedoms are to be “given” or as though they can be taken away in the first place.

The women’s agenda in Lebanon has been reduced to the provision of basic freedoms; however, women have entered the public sphere (although mildly) in the pre-revolutionary situation, one of the fundamental circumstances Moghadam argues where change is more likely to take place. Couple this, with the fact that incredibly overwhelming numbers of women took part in the revolution and assumed leadership roles in multiple civil society movements. In the cases of the Arab Spring revolts, one can apply this observation perfectly. These conditions were present Tunisia for instance, where the revolution shaped a woman’s “role” in quite an unprecedented fashion in the county, but this was not the case in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen for instance, and as touched upon earlier.

Moving from this point, Lebanese women’s role in the revolution, currently ongoing across Lebanon, as well as setting a strong foundation for eagerly watching neighboring countries’ own aspirations, is evident, strong-willed and fundamentally important for the outcomes of these difficult times. It is fundamentally important toward the struggle for the feminist and women’s agendas not to be overridden or stampeded under “broader” demands. It is fundamentally important because this is the wave of change women have been demanding for generations. And it is fundamentally important because the women’s movement in Lebanon has already built such strong foundations for itself, this is the time where it gets to reap the benefits.

Although it is too soon to tell whether or not this revolution will yield the next Qiu Jin, Margarita Neri, Mercy Otis Warren or the next Esraa Abdel Fattah, one thing is certain: the Lebanese women of this movement are the heart, soul, lungs, and WOMB of this new wave.