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Women's Activism in the Lebanese October Uprising: The Promises and Pitfalls of Women-Centered Politics

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¹I am using "women" to refer to anyone who identifies as a woman, including trans women. That said, trans activism has its own histories and trajectories, as well as its own manifestations in the uprising, whose analysis goes beyond the scope of this brief.

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Introduction

When Malak Alawiyye joined protests on the first day of what came to be known as the October uprising, she did not predict that a video image of her kicking one of the armed bodyguards of Lebanese MP Akram Chehayeb would go viral. On October 17, people in Lebanon took to the streets shortly after the announcement of a new tax on Whatsapp, the most widely-used instant messaging application in Lebanon. With a national currency on the verge of collapse, an astronomical public debt, increasing austerity measures, and accumulating taxes on the already poor and dispossessed, the announcement of a Whatsapp tax was the straw that broke the camel's back. In the weeks that followed, what started as outrage about deteriorating economic and living conditions turned into a national wave of cross-sectarian, cross-regional, and cross-class protests against political leaders and their cronies who have ruled the country and pillaged its resources since the end of the civil war in 1990. On that decisive first day, *Alawiyye*, along with hundreds of others, took to the streets in downtown Beirut to say that enough was enough. As protests turned violent when the bodyguards of Chehayeb pushed through the converging crowds to make way for his car convoy, *Alawiyye* was captured in a mobile phone video of an eye-witness kicking a Kalashnikov-wielding man in the gut.

In an interview with a local TV station, *Alawiyye* explained that, shortly after the confrontation, she ran in disbelief to her then-boyfriend to ask him whether he had seen it all, expressing her concern that no one would see what had happened. She didn't know, then, that the kick she was afraid no one would see would turn her into "the icon of the revolution." In the span of a day, her still image – photoshopped in bright colors with a caption that reads "alehom" (which could be roughly translated into "onwards" or "kick them out") – went viral on Facebook and Whatsapp, with many posting it as their profile picture. *Alawiyye*'s image became one among many, in the visual archive of the uprising that gripped the country between October 2019 and March 2020, to feature women acting in defiance to authority.

Reaching the limelight in the first days of protest, "the kick" assumed iconic status, inspiring thousands and setting the tone of what was to follow. It also tapped into a collective psyche that has witnessed a gradual transformation in the place and role it accords to women in public life. As was the case in previous uprisings that swept the Arab region since 2010, the Lebanese October uprising triggered a social reckoning with the current status and stature of women: their agency, their rights and demands, the injustices they endure, and the battles they fight.

The visible presence and participation of women in protests captivated the collective national imagination and captured media attention, becoming an often-commented on aspect of the uprising in local, regional, and international media coverage. What did their presence in large numbers say about the social and political status of women in Lebanon today? Why did their appearance in shorts and tank tops and their free mingling with male protestors trigger strong reactions from viewers and commentators in neighboring Arab countries? And what does women's participation and reactions to it say about the relative degree of equality and freedom that Lebanese women are perceived to enjoy vis-à-vis their Arab counterparts? But, and beyond a focus on the social and political meanings that women's bodies assume as they move and act in public, what can the uprising tell us about women's political agency, their activism: its motivations, forms, and the discourses through which it appears in public?

In what follows, I discuss women's activism as a distinct sphere of political agency and practice, highlighting two aspects that help us better contextualize it and understand its significance and impact as a force of social change: 1) the emergence of a feminist public sphere over the last decade and the politicization of gender as an axis of oppression and emancipation; and 2) the heterogeneity of women's discourses and demands, which found a space to appear during the uprising. It was in the streets that the revolutionary ferment of this moment was most immediately felt. It was in the streets that sectarian, class, and gender

boundaries were negotiated, crossed, and reconfigured, even if momentarily. It is therefore to the street that I turn my attention in order to understand the uprising not merely as an event, but as a universe of discursive contestation. Here, women's collective agency - in its cumulative effect over the years and through its heterogeneity - allows them to intervene in public discourse and to challenge and transform the rules of the patriarchal social order.

Defining Women's Activism

Women were everywhere: On the frontlines clashing with anti-riot police; running after arrested protestors to write down their names; tending to the wounded and those fainting from tear gas; blocking roads with their bodies and cars; distributing food, onions, and masks. They organized marches, held candle vigils, and led chants, their voices reverberating on megaphones and speakers across cascading crowds that chanted along. In Beirut, and in cities and towns across the country, women owned the streets, carving within them a space for their own, long-standing demands: for equal citizenship, for custody, for bodily autonomy, and for social justice. They also owned the screens - as experts on talk shows, reporters, and eye-witnesses in live news reports. Their images assumed iconic status and slogans like "*Al-Thawra Untha*" (the revolution is female), sprayed on walls and floors and circulating on social media, registered a wide social recognition of women's political agency, indeed of their pioneering role in the October uprising.

Women's activism, however, cannot be rigidly defined nor can it be apprehended as a cohesive category for social and political inquiry. It refers to a variety of social and political practices and actions carried out by women with very different ideologies of gender and understandings of female subjectivity. The discourses through which women come to speak and act as political subjects are diverse, and largely shaped by their age and socio-economic backgrounds among other factors. What unites these different iterations of activism is therefore not a common vision, necessarily, but a common will to act in public. It is their collective engagement as women and with other women, particularly in the first month of protests, that I turn to in the following sections.

Women's engagement was not exceptional, nor did it occur in a historical vacuum. The uprising did not trigger women's participation; rather, it provided a context within which the social, political, and organizational power that they had accrued, particularly over the last decade, was made visible. Indeed, the salience of issues like sexual harassment as well as clear demands for women's right to citizenship and custody in this

revolutionary moment attest to the long discursive labor that went into their production and mainstreaming. It is therefore imperative to situate women's activism in the uprising within a longer history, particularly on the heels of a decade that saw the rise of feminist protest cultures. It is also necessary to recognize the heterogeneity of women's discourses, tactics, and objectives. Here, differences in the ideologies underpinning political participation call into question any easy conceptualization of women as a cohesive political group or constituency. While some marched as mothers, calling for civil peace in neighborhoods that witnessed sectarian skirmishes, others organized feminist marches against sexual harassment. Feminism may not be a common or shared conceptual and political framework of action, it nevertheless provides the necessary analytical lens to understand the implications of gender for political participation and the emancipatory possibilities it carries, particularly for women, once it is mobilized as an axis, among others, of collective identification.

I- Antecedents to Women's Activism

In addition to the sheer number of women participating in the protests that erupted in October, what distinguished the recent popular uprising in Lebanon is the salience of anti-patriarchal and feminist chants and slogans, most notably in the capital Beirut. Seasoned feminist activists - members of feminist groups, collectives, and organizations - often led marches, chanting against sexism, racism, and homophobia and demanding justice for women and marginalized groups including refugees and migrant workers. For these, street protests had long been an integral part of their feminist political practice. Since the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the formal end to Syrian hegemony in 2005, the country witnessed the burgeoning of a new protest culture spearheaded by rights-based civil society organizations and identity-based urban collectives. It is in this context that women's rights organizations and feminist collectives like Kafa, ABAAD, Nasawiya, Meem, and Damme have emerged, formulating a counter-discourse that - to different

degrees - problematized dominant ideologies of gender and challenged the roles, norms, and hierarchies that they produce. This discourse, circulating as it was within the densely-networked fields of civil society activism and alternative cultural production, gained traction among an expanding section of the urban, educated middle-and upper-classes.

The decade preceding the October uprising thus saw the emergence and consolidation of what can be described as a feminist public sphere, where the previously unspoken or marginalized concerns and grievances of women – such as domestic violence and sexual harassment – were given unprecedented visibility¹. Although different in structure and approach, women's organizations and feminist collectives managed to sensitize the public on patriarchal domination and the inequalities it produces. NGOs advocated on behalf of women, ascribing a collective dimension to their individual struggles and engaging the state through campaigns for legal reform in civil and personal status laws.² Collectives and cooperatives created feminist spaces where new political identities, cultural affinities, and forms of solidarity could be explored and cultivated. In the course of their engagement in these separate but interrelated spheres of activism, women organized and participated in numerous street demonstrations and protest actions. It is therefore important to note that protests and demonstrations were not new to feminist activists and organizers who participated in the uprising. Indeed, since 2011, feminist activists have participated in larger protest movements – including “The People want to Overthrow the Sectarian Regime” in 2011 and the garbage crisis protests in 2015 – where they have honed their organizational skills and gained experience in leadership, mobilization, and collective action. What was different, this time around, is that they had a much larger and much more diverse audience to address in the streets and on screens. The whole nation was tuned in, and the causes and demands that women have carried for years found in the revolutionary public sphere a highly networked and hyper-mediated space

to appear. Accordingly, issues and demands that have long animated the feminist public sphere seamlessly became part of the larger repertoire of dissent against the status quo.

The work carried out by this constellation of organizations, collectives, and individuals has nevertheless shared the same broad vision of making previously ignored and overlooked “women’s issues” matters of public concern. In their analysis of the feminist social and political praxis of “making public” putatively intimate matters such as sexual violence or bodily rights, political theorists Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (1987) identified two senses for the term: on one hand, it is about questioning values that have been oppressive to women, making them the object of critique, reflection, and contestation. On the other hand, “making public” is about making these issues subject to state action and legislation.³ In addition to women’s presence in protests, the visible presence of women-specific demands and feminist social concepts – “*thoukouria*” (patriarchal masculinity), “*taharrosh*” (harassment), “*unf usari*” (domestic violence) – in the discursive universe of the uprising registered the existence of a feminist, oppositional imagination that had long been in the making. Indeed, chants like “*al-fasad al-fasad jouwwa jouwwa al-‘ammamat*” (corruption is inside clerical turbans), heard during the uprising, was first chanted in the front of the Shia Higher Council in a demonstration demanding custody rights for Shia mothers.

By contextualizing the uprising, situating it within a longer history of women’s advocacy, mobilization, and cultural production, we begin to unearth its multiple histories and roots in previous protest movements.

II- Heterogeneity of Women’s Positions, Discourses, and Forms of Dissent

To speak of “women’s activism” is to consider a wide array of discourses and practices that challenge the

¹ Campaigns to criminalize domestic violence and sexual harassment are a case in point. In the process of drafting new laws and pushing for legal reforms that protect women, local organizations sensitized the media and public opinion about the violence and discrimination that women are systematically subjected to.

² While the efficacy of legal activism in enacting social change is up for debate, these legal battles gave unprecedented visibility to the plight that women endure in intimate relationships and the private sphere of the family and the domestic household. Since the murders of Roula Yaacoub in 2013 and Manal Assi in 2014 by their husbands, cases of domestic abuse and murder are often covered in the evening news and victims’ names and stories are publicized.

³ Seyla Benhabib & Drucilla Cornell (1987). “Introduction: Beyond the politics of gender,” in S. Benhabib & D. Cornell (Eds.), *Feminism as Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

status quo by centering women as political agents and/or as a marginalized and disenfranchised social group. Differences in age, educational background, class, race, and citizenship status, to name a few, necessarily infuse and transform women's politics and discourses and the forms that their agency assumes in public life.

In insisting on the heterogeneity of the category "women," we avoid elitist, reductive, and exclusionary claims about what constitutes women's "activism." Indeed, what counts as political speech and political action is often disputed, particularly when it is performed by women in times of social and political revolt such as the October uprising.

In this brief, I use "activism" to refer to collective action undertaken by women in public. This is not to discount or undermine the significance of political agency exercised by the individual or in the private sphere. Rather, it is to narrow down the scope of inquiry in assessing the nature and significance of women's participation in the uprising.

The street witnessed different kinds of mobilizations and protests by women that were largely shaped by their age, cultural backgrounds, and political experience. While some spoke *as* women against the status quo, others also spoke *for* women in making specific claims and demands about their status and rights. These actions could be roughly organized into four types:

- In its broad definition, women's activism within the uprising could be understood as any political action undertaken by women, as individuals and as a group, for **the public good** (for example women banging their pots on balconies every night in a show of support to the protests, women forming a human chain around protestors to shield them from police attacks, or women organizing a march to condemn sectarian violence). The public good is broadly defined here. Setting it apart from the following types is in no way to suggest that women's issues are not also demands for and serve the common good. But the difference in motivation and objective, between this and the second type, is important to note.
- In a more specific sense, it includes any collective action that women perform to make specific claims and demands towards improving **the lives of women** (for example organizing a demonstration demanding custody rights or

citizenship rights for women). What differentiates this type from the former is the centering of women's issues, needs, and struggles.

- In its self-proclaimed **feminist** sense, women's activism refers to collective political action that seeks to end patriarchal domination and dismantle the power hierarchies that it produces (for example, women writing, composing, and singing popular chants against the patriarchy and its gender roles and hierarchies). Here, the self-referential use of feminism as an ideology and political identity distinguishes this type from the former.
- Finally, in its **intersectional feminist** definition, women's activism is collective action by women that places gender along other axes of oppression – such as class, race, and sexual orientation – in enacting a vision of social justice and change that leaves no one behind (for example, women organizing a vigil to commemorate the passing of two migrant workers in a high-end buildings-under-construction set on fire by protestors in the first few days of protests, or when women chant against racism and homophobia in demonstrations).

These types are not mutually exclusive, nor does participation in one preclude participation in other forms of activism. This typology of activism merely serves as an analytical tool to elucidate the variety in women's political discourses and practices and to formulate a nuanced understanding of what motivates their political participation. It also helps us identify usually neglected or dismissed forms of activism and capture possible historical transformations from one type of activism to the other.

In order to illustrate some of the differences, in what follows I discuss two types of collective street actions organized by women during the uprising: the first is a mothers' march protesting inter-sectarian violence organized by female residents of the Chiyeh/Ain al-Remmaneh neighborhood in Beirut; the second is a march against sexual harassment organized by a younger generation of mostly university-educated women, many of whom identify as feminists. What unites these two actions are the claims they make on public space and their centering of female subjectivity as grounds for collective identification and action. What distinguish them are the different political sensibilities and cultural registers through which women come to speak as political subjects.

Mothers' March

On November 27, 2019, female residents of the Chiyah/ Ain al-Remmeneh neighborhoods called for a mothers' march to protest against the sectarian tensions and skirmishes that had occurred the night before between the Christian supporters of the Lebanese Forces and the Shi'a supporters of Amal and Hezbollah.⁴ Women living on both sides of what used to be a demarcation line during the civil war jointly organized the march to condemn sectarian violence and call for civil peace, chanting "no return to civil war, this is a peaceful revolution, we don't want sectarianism," and "no to sectarianism, we want national unity, we want a civil state." Hundreds of women and mothers walked the streets carrying Lebanese flags and exchanging white roses, in an event that was widely covered by the media.

With news headlines like "Mothers of Ain al-Remmeneh and Chiyah Put an End to Beirut Confrontations" and "Mothers' March from Ain al-Remmeneh to Chiyah: No to Violence, No to Sectarianism, No to Civil War," women attempted to subvert the narrative of sectarian tension that had dominated the news cycle since the beginning of protests in October. Footage of mothers speaking out against violence and affirming the cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian nature of the uprising went viral on social media, and the hashtags #Ain al-Remmeneh and #Chiyah were trending with people tweeting in praise of mothers' engagement.

While the march included people from different ages and generations, it was marked by the participation of older women as well as women with children. Residents threw rice from their balconies on protestors and the traditional *zalgouta* was repeated throughout in what became a spectacle of national reconciliation— one that had not occurred since the end of the civil war in 1990. The age make-up of the march, in addition to the slogans displayed on banners and heard in chants, recalled old war-era discourses on civil peace and brought back the figure of the mother – mother of the kidnapped and disappeared, mother of the martyr – to the collective imagination. Motherhood was thus recuperated as an enunciative position through which women made claims to an embattled public space.

March Against Sexual Harassment

On December 7, 2019, a group of young, mostly university-educated women called for a demonstration against sexual harassment. Marching from the American University of Beirut to Riad al-Solh Square, women carried a large banner that read "Here to bring down the patriarchal system, here against sexual harassment and rape" (*houna li-isqat al-nizam al-abawi al-zoukouri; houna dodd al-taharrosh wal-ightisab*).

The call for the march was issued in light of a series of public allegations of sexual harassment against a man named Marwan Habib, who was spotted and identified by one of his victims during his participation in a demonstration in downtown Beirut. In an attempt to call out and denounce the presence of sexual predators within revolutionary circles, young women started sharing their testimonies of the harassment they endured at the hands of Habib on social media. This online campaign eventually led to the physical march where, alongside slogans against sexual harassment, women chanted against patriarchy and for women's bodily autonomy and freedom: "*'alli sawtik la-yenbah, al-zoukouriyi ha n'ella ba'h*" (woman scream your lungs out until misogyny is wiped out); "*al-mar'a btehki b'esma, el-mar'a btemlok jesma*" (woman speaks in her own name, woman owns her own body); "*ma hada y'arer 'anni, la bayyi wala 'amm*" (no one chooses on my behalf, not my father nor my father-in-law); "*keef bteskot keef keef, 'an al-taharrosh wal te'eni*" (how can you remain silent about harassment and violence?).

The march was characterized by the participation of young women and its departure point, the University, was symbolic inasmuch as it was primarily around university campuses that Habib harassed his victims, it was mostly university students who shared their testimonies, and it is in universities that many women first develop a consciousness and a discourse on sexual harassment.

⁴ Hizballah and Amal supporter had stormed the predominantly Christian side of Ain al-Rimmeneh chanting "Shi'a Shi'a" and "Allah, Nasrallah, w al-Dahieh killa" (God, Nasrallah, and Dahieh), inciting a violent confrontation with LF supporters on Assad el-Assad street that separates Ain al-Remmeneh and the predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Chiyah.

The Promises and Pitfalls of Women-Centered Politics

What does a women-centered politics mean?

- On one hand, it could refer to the centering of female subjectivity in calls for action where women are called upon to exercise their power to serve the common good. It means, then, the centering of their *political agency*, their capacity to act individually and collectively to take a political stance, or achieve a political goal.
- On the other hand, it refers to the centering of women's issues, interests, and needs in the formulation of political claims and demands. Here, there is recognition of women as a marginalized and disenfranchised social group whose lives and interests need to be improved and protected.

Women's collective participation in street protests signals two things: first, their rejection of a confinement in the private sphere of reproduction and domesticity and of their marginalization in the sphere of politics; second, the exercise of new forms of power that have the potential to change the rules of the social order. Women's presence and engagement in street action and mobilization therefore marks the changing boundaries of the political in our society, and with it the shifting line between private and public realms. As political theorist Seyla Benhabib (1993) writes, "with the entry of every new group into the public space of politics, the scope of the public gets extended" (p.104).¹ Based on the brief overview of women's activism during the uprising, I want to end with two more general observations about politics that center women.

The Anti-Sectarian Politics in Women's Activism

Collective actions like the mothers' march as well as demonstrations for custody rights that were observed during the uprising reveal the broader cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian features of women's activism. By foregrounding gender as an axis of subordination and of collective identification, women's activism has disturbed and challenged the sectarian parameters of political claims-making in Lebanon. **In a context where sect is constructed as the primordial, normative, and prescribed axis of political mobilization and participation, identification with womanhood may displace sectarian affiliation as the determinant of political engagement.** At the very least, it can expose the imbalance in the distribution of rights and resources, in a system that claims to ensure "sectarian balance" while privileging men across sects and treating women as second-class citizens.

From their marginal and subordinate position, women have and can formulate and consolidate a discourse against sectarianism, which institutionalizes discrimination against them and strips them of equal civil, political, and personal rights. In this regard, women's lived experience of injustice under religious personal status laws, within a power-sharing system that grants each sect the power to govern personal affairs as it sees fit, has fueled activist efforts over the last decade to change discriminatory laws and create new ones that protect women and guarantee their rights.² This is most evidently seen in the growing demand for a unified and civil personal status law that grants equal rights to men and women in personal affairs. Organically emerging in a sectarian context, women's activism can therefore be considered as pioneering anti-sectarian politics, which are necessary for any meaningful systemic social and political change in Lebanon.

¹ Seyla Benhabib (1993). "Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space." *History of the Human Sciences*, 6(97).

² Women from all officially recognized 18 sects suffer from discrimination in religious personal status laws that govern marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance.

The Need for Multi-Racial and Multi-National Women's Movement

As with any social category, it is crucial to question the referential subjects that get included and excluded when we speak of “women.” Which lives and experiences are conjured in narratives of women’s oppression and which bodies are foregrounded in emancipatory discourses of womanhood?

Women are not all equal under patriarchy. Their experiences with subordination, oppression, and disenfranchisement vary greatly according to the different positions they hold in societies stratified by class, race, and nationality. Their consciousness, capabilities, and resources for action are therefore conditioned and constrained by their respective position in what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has called the “matrix of domination.”³ If women’s activism in Lebanon is to be considered truly emancipatory in its vision, we must expand the scope of what constitutes a “women’s issue.” Once we factor in race, class, nationality, and citizenship status alongside gender as axes of oppression and subordination, we realize that non-Lebanese women in Lebanon suffer from distinctive forms of discrimination and navigate power hierarchies where their gender is not the main or only obstacle.

Migrant and refugee women in Lebanon – including those who have been residing in and working in the country for decades – have yet to be granted their labor and civil rights. Beyond the uprising, in considering women’s activism in Lebanon, we can no longer be restricted in our thinking to the struggles of Lebanese women only. In this regard, the activism of migrant domestic workers for labor rights and of Palestinian women for civil rights provides examples of intersectional struggles against injustice, ones that are fueled by class, race, and citizenship status as much as they are by gender.⁴ A women-centered politics is truly emancipatory inasmuch as it sheds the fiction of sameness, recognizing the plight of all women and addressing inequalities among them.

³ Patricia Hill Collins (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

⁴ For example, the Migrant Domestic Workers Alliance aims to empower women from all nationalities who are migrant domestic workers in Lebanon in the quest for labor rights and in struggling against racism, classism, sexism, and exploitation.

Conclusion

Considered by many to be the largest popular uprising in the country's modern history, the October uprising provides a vantage point to examine the scale and scope of women's political agency and the forms of their participation in public life. Beyond registering a wide disenchantment with the ruling class and a collective will to change the status quo, the protest movement that swept Lebanon between October 2019 and March 2020 constituted a universe of discursive contestation where class and gender discourses and hierarchies were challenged and reconfigured, even if momentarily. Putting aside the political gains and losses of the uprising – its successes and failures in achieving some of what it set out to do – the revolutionary pulse of this moment could be located in the altered social orders that were imagined and lived out in the streets. There, women appeared as equal players. With their bodies and words, they made claims on a public space that is not usually, fully theirs.

Coming at the heels of a decade of feminist organizing and movement building, the uprising provided a context through which we can assess the political and social power that women have accrued over time. But it is also a context in which the patriarchal backlash to that power could be observed. With intimidation and defamation campaigns by the political establishment on one hand, and persistent misogyny, bullying, and harassment in progressive, leftist, and revolutionary circles on the other hand, women have their work cut out for them.



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