

The October 17, 2019: Female Revolution

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Gender-based violence has always been apparent in the Arab world, and Lebanon is no exception. There have been several attempts to unify women living in Lebanon to provoke change or start conversations. The yearly women's march is one example to unify the voices of diverse women, and provide an outlet for the LGBTQIA+ community, domestic workers, and Lebanese nationals. This march is a representation of a war against the patriarchy, misogyny, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, homophobia, and transphobia. Several campaigns were held to abolish laws retaining the rights of marital rape, underage marriage, and the right of dropping rape charges if a perpetrator marries their victim. These acts of activism were made possible with the help of several NGOs in Lebanon, university students, and clubs. The October 17th, 2019, Lebanese revolution was no different. Individuals of marginalized communities and activists took advantage of the revolution to voice their concerns and demands and take control of the conversation while reclaiming their agency. By taking a stance, they showed the Lebanese government and citizens that the revolution is also about them, that “the revolution is female.” One NGO that played a vital role in doing so was ABAAD.

ABAAD is an NGO situated in Lebanon that aims to achieve gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable, social, and economic development in the MENA region. The ABAAD team consists of lawyers, consultants, social workers, and dedicated activists who work together to “achieve an equitable society free of hegemonic masculinity and violence against women” (ABAAD). They’ve been working alongside Lebanese citizens to

reshape social order and reform certain laws that degrade women and strip them away from their basic human rights. Their most famous campaign objective was abolishing Article 522 of the Lebanese Penal Code which, in summary, states that: a rapist can be exonerated if he marries his victim (Azzi, 2017). On another note, an 18-year-old woman, Marya Latif came forward in a tweet about her experience with sexual assault. She did so to expose her harasser and pave the way for other women to come forth with their experiences. Shortly after her confession, several victims revealed their stories and provided the public with the names of their harassers hoping to warn other possible victims. The attention drawn to the matter was too big for ABAAD to ignore, therefore they decided to launch a new campaign. The NGO played a vital role in the October 17th Lebanese revolution. That being said, on December 4th, 2019, ABAAD released a song followed by a music video called “Not Your Honor.” It was created in solidarity with all the women victims of sexual assault and violence, who were forcefully silenced by a misogynistic and patriarchal society. This instigates that it is not solely sexual predators at fault here, but the government as well. This notion is reflected through the lyrics “I’m the girl whose rights are scrapped, body raped.” Also, the lyric “I sing for us all to make traditions fall” (ABAADMENA, 2019), sheds light on dominant patriarchal ideologies, values, and traditions, which, to this day, are practiced by Arab families. “My honor bleeds a stain on a white sheet, awaited for that night to be complete to sentence me as pure, or forever endure pain and torture” (ABAADMENA, 2019). This line emphasizes the Arab tradition where a woman is condemned if she doesn’t bleed on a white cloth during her first night of marriage, implying that she isn’t a virgin rather she had pre-marital sex.

Moreover, in the wake of the revolution, women have been at the forefront of several events that took place within the context of change. The revolution provided a platform not only to fight for political and economic justice, and the downfall of the Lebanese

government, but as a platform for lobbying, and activism. It was a way for activists of marginalized and stigmatized groups and communities in Lebanon to voice their opinions and concerns in a society that has repeatedly let them down, through art, chants, waving flags, music, and dance. These groups and communities include and are not limited to; women, the LGBTQIA+ community, victims of sexual assault and violence, etc. During the first few days of the revolution, a woman defending herself from the authorities was recorded kicking a police officer. She was seen as a heroine in the early stages and characterized as a token of bravery. Both the woman and the song “Not You Honor” were inspirational stories and artistic pieces for victims of rape and sexual violence and they led several events in the revolution. They both encouraged individuals of minority groups and marginalized communities to reclaim their agency and their rights to fight for social and political justice in the name of human rights, feminism, and the abolishment of patriarchy. Women all over the country unified during the revolution in several events such as hitting pots, pans, and kitchen utensils during marches, the women’s march, candle lighting, videos, posters, murals, and flash mobs leading to statements such as “the revolution is female.”, and finally, including women in the Lebanese national anthem (Diab, 2017).

Gender segregation and gender-based violence have been a fighting battle for several years in the Arab world, and to this day, the battle hasn’t subsided. With the help of several NGOs, university students, and clubs, Lebanese women and activists were able to voice their frustration and demands during the October 17, 2019, Lebanese revolution. Numerous events and instances played a vital role in challenging the patriarchy, misogyny, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, homophobia, and transphobia. One event empowered another and the revolution was no longer just about taking down the government and holding them accountable to the economic instability in Lebanon, but also about a female revolution.

ABAAD released the song “Not your Honor” which was a gateway to the topic of rape and sexual assault in Lebanon. The revolution elicited opportunities for women to voice their anger and frustration regarding the heinous acts of rape, sexual violence and harassment, and gender-based violence. The phrase "My voice will be heard and breakdown the walls. Today I lead the revolution” (ABAADMENA, 2019) is found in “Not Your Honor,” and it is clear that women, despite all the conflict, indeed played a significant role in leading the revolution.

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