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TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM IN LEBANON'S
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: BETWEEN *FITNA*,
FAWDA, AND FEMINISM

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates transnational campaigns from the international and state level to consider the existence of transnational activism in Lebanon's women's movement. Lebanon's women's movement serves as an example to analyze the effects of transnationalism on national campaigns for policy change, in the Lebanese case, reformed personal status laws and citizenship rights. The study follows the literature on Lebanon's women's movement to extend an analysis of systemic effects on the structure of women's organizing with emphasis on international partnerships in state-centered contention during the country's post-war development. Pressure for greater recognition and observance of women's human rights has risen as a pertinent feature of civil society as Lebanon has become further enmeshed in international partnerships and U.N. agencies. As a result, the structure of the women's movement has transformed from a loose network of women's advocacy groups to a centralized, top-down movement. The focus of this case study investigates the spur of a bottom-up, grassroots feminist movement as a response to top-down contention and cooptation of women's organizing by a UN-Lebanon alliance through the UNFPA and National Commission for Lebanese Women. With focus on grassroots organizing and diffusion of feminist discourse, the case study of *Nasawiya* provides a contrast between transnational activism in women's organizing across ideology and structure. Still, Lebanon's women's movements reveals old truths of the country's sectarian political system: women's organizing continues to suffer at the hands of patriarchal politics. Nonetheless, the emergence of a grassroots, feminist polity suggests that, as the "mainstream" women's movement has become less fragmented and institutionalized, the "alternative" feminist movement has also increased in activism and visibility, thus implying a new schism in Lebanon's women's movement.

Keywords: Women's Movement, Transnational Activism, Transnational Feminism, Grassroots Organizing, Feminist International Relations Theory

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CHAPTER ONE

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIOPOLITICAL GRIEVANCES IN LEBANON

1.1 – Situating the Thesis

“I have a feeling that our time has come. We, the people on the margins. The angry, disenfranchised people who pay too much for bread and fuel and rent and water and parking. We, the kids who grew up in the 80s. We, who are unamused by boring media and mindless entertainment. We, who’ve been struggling for years trying to create small, important projects that go nowhere and achieve nothing. Civil marriage. Women’s rights. Green spaces. Anti-corruption. Renewable energy. Equal pay. Migrant rights. Bicycle lanes. Refugee rights. Public schools. Public universities. Social security. Protect our beaches. Protect our workers. Protect our Internet. Protect love. Save our animals. Save our forests. Save our heritage. End torture. End the civil war. Build a public transportation system that works already! How much longer are we supposed to fight – alone and secluded – for what is right? How much longer do we bang our heads against a Parliament that doesn’t give a damn? Over 300 laws they have in their drawers and they waste their time – time that we pay for with our sweat and hard work – to quarrel over issues that don’t even concern us. Better yet, they create issues and convince us that they are protecting us from each other. Who protects us from the daily struggle it takes to live in this country that millions of us have abandoned because it gets [sic] more and more unbearable every day. I have a feeling that thousands of you agree that enough is enough. And what’s different this time is that I have a feeling thousands of you want to do something about it. What better thing to do than take back Parliament?”

—Nadine Moawad

Nadine Moawad’s blog post from April 4, 2012 has reverberated throughout Lebanon’s active *blogosphere* from social media outlets, Twitter, Facebook, and not to mention at her own blog, www.nadinemoawad.com. Titled, “I have a feeling our time has come,” Moawad’s tone at first reads as an almost too quixotic declaration. However, after an exhilarating first read, a second study reveals that Moawad, a widely revered activist in Lebanon’s feminist collective, *Nasawiya*, suggests a clearly articulated dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Further, and more suggestive are the grievances delineated in Moawad’s statement and a call to “Take back Parliament.” Moawad’s activism to challenge complacency and instigate a social movement is at the core of Lebanon’s feminists

collective, *Nasawiya*. Since 2010, feminist in Lebanon have been organizing towards a larger social movement among Lebanon's grassroots community. The structure, rhetoric, and campaigns within this very social movement are characterized as grounded in a feminist framework and "alternative" in their approaches to existing women's organizations in Lebanon.

An influx of NGOs and transnational networks for women's organizing and the use of social media during the preparation phase of protests have contributed to the changed structure in Lebanon's women's movement. However, a great aspect of the movement's emerging character can also be attributed to the intervening variables of internationalism and the purview of globalization on Lebanon's political and economic opportunities for increasing women's rights.

An analysis of the women's movement in Lebanon provides an insightful overview of the transnational diffusion of liberal feminist values through generations and across cultural boundaries. This paper asserts that, due to the sectarian political structure in Lebanon, the women's movement has been historically fragmented (Bray-Collins 2003; Weber 2003; Khattab 2010). However, this study is a departure from the existing literature on Lebanon's women's movement in that it situates the women's movement from the domestic sphere to the international arena. Amongst the abundance of literature, Harb (2010) lightly considers transnational activism through transnational advocacy networks in Lebanon's women's movement. However, the mention of transnational advocacy networks is depicted in broad strokes, where such networks are described to "play an important role in reducing repression in various countries by supplying information, socializing agents in a world culture, and using economic pressure."¹

¹ Harb, 2010, p. 18

This study focuses on the transnational structures wherein underlie the mechanisms of women's organizing. Upon investigation in the linking process of Lebanon's women's movement, or according to Sidney Tarrow (2005), "how local activists cognitively connect to global symbols,"² activism is notably transnational in its political opportunity structure and grievances. Linkage occurs through various process instigated by activists seeking to side-step national contention, or namely in Lebanon this process emerges as a result of an unresponsive government and languished national policies for women's rights. This process, as Tarrow identifies, is the initial domestic process within a transnational social movement.³ In Lebanon's women's movement, linkage, or the linking process, to a transnational force serves as the identifying marker of transnational activism. Leading to the characterization of feminist activism as the linking process, the paper constructs a two-fold analysis of the women's movement to broadly consider the structural effects on agency. First it seeks to examine the systemic variables that cultivate structural inconsistencies in the women's movement in Lebanon. From this analysis, a discourse of international-nation-state contentious politics will emerge to consider the pervasive effects of neoliberalism on institutionalizing the women's movement. A second analysis will characterize the existence of transnational activism as a product of diffused liberal feminist values that have allowed efflorescence of transnational feminist activism. The implications of international contentious politics and transnational activism in Lebanon's women's movement will further elucidate on the magnitude international politics, and particularly U.N. policies clash with feminist values in Lebanon. The discrepancy between U.N. campaigns for women's rights and the aspirations of

² Tarrow, 2005, p. 60

³ Tarrow, 2005, p. 60

feminist activism for women's rights organizing in Lebanon's domestic politics make up the fabric of transnational contention in Lebanon's emerging feminist movement.

In addressing the juncture of international contentious politics and domestically rooted transnational activism, I focus primarily on the displacement of policy oversight for women's human rights from the state to United Nations agencies. These efforts highlight attempts to institute Western-style liberties for women.

This thesis attempts to identify transnational activism in Lebanon's women's movement with a study of *Nasawiya*, a Feminist Collective of activists in Lebanon. A progeny from social movement theory, transnational activism discerns the character of activism in Lebanon's contemporary women's movement as a projection of international contentious politics for women's rights. Upon further investigation, this study identifies a correlation between state-centered politics, the ineffectual inclusive political opportunity structure in Lebanon, the implications of supranational relations with Lebanon's civil society, and the emergence of a progressive social movement for a feminist, secular polity.

However, in its infancy, Lebanon's Feminist Collective *Nasawiya* faces obstacles to mobilizing for political awareness beyond social media forums and protest spheres. In its campaign for women's rights in Lebanon, the Feminist Collective faces opposition from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which is the representative body for fifty-seven member states, including Lebanon, at the United Nations Population Fund, "the leader in reproductive health and population and development". Aside from its alternative discourse for a feminist polity, activists in *Nasawiya* express disdain against the state of Lebanon. Activists express a struggle against patriarchy and an expressed desire to gain recognition as a legitimate representative body in the women's movement.

A concluding analysis will delineate the existing constraints of Lebanon's sectarian political structure on transnational feminist activism. The case of patriarchal representatives on behalf of Lebanese in the UNFPA and Lebanon's parliament, that which aims to structure its human rights policies in accordance to U.N. criteria, serves as the primary intersection of contention between national and international discourse for policies on women's issues. From here, the crux of state contention has emerged from refusal to ratify U.N. policies (under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW) for women's rights, where certain articles have been deemed as defiant to prevailing political, cultural, and religious norms. In response to contention between the OIC and the UNFPA, the Lebanese state has been complacent towards the former organization.

The implicit argument addressed in this thesis argues, as long as patriarchal features of the Lebanese sectarian system are not addressed, the issue of gendered politics among elite decision-makers will persist at the national and international level, even when there are transnational grassroots pressures seeking to reform the system.

1.2 – The Topic of the Present Women's Movement in Lebanon

On the cusp of Lebanon's last parliamentary elections in 2009, *Al Jazeera* English aired a news segment on the dismal participation of women in Lebanese politics. In his newscast, Todd Baer posed the overwrought and contrived stereotype that "Lebanon is widely regarded as one of the most open societies for women in the Arab world". However, Baer admits what activists of Lebanon's women's movement have been challenging, that, "What you see on the street does not transcend into the political arena."

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

6.1 – Summary

The women's movement has been at the forefront of civil advocacy since before Lebanon's history as a nation-state. As Weber (2003) and Thompson (2000) recollect, women in Lebanon have been an integral faction to initiating social and political change since the nation sought sovereignty from the French Mandate.⁴ Throughout its colonization up until the present period of the "Arab Spring," women have been adopting newer skills over time to organizing campaigns in Lebanon. This thesis proposes, however, a new and still emerging women's movement in Lebanon – one that has divorced itself from the nationalistic—or, more aptly, the mainstream—women's movement. From activism by this faction of feminists, grassroots campaigns have shown insight into the pervasive transnational structure of activism for policy reform on women's status, and, secondly, the aspirations to expand policy rapport for women's human rights.

Yet, Lebanon's women's movements are not necessarily fragmented along the lines of national versus transnational social organizing. Women in Lebanon ultimately want the same ends for policy reform against gender-based violence and women's personal status codes. The means to mobilizing support, however, are the fundamental differences between the mainstream women's movement and the alternative, feminist movement. Thus, the women's movement is not fragmented as a whole, but rather bifurcated into two separate movements with similar objectives and vastly differing

⁴ Weber, 2003; Thompson, 2000

means. Whereas the mainstream movement of civil actors organizes in line with the political system, the alternative feminist movement decries the sectarian system as the sole offender to women's welfare in Lebanon, and human rights as a whole.

For the feminist women's movement to begin to attain its goals, activists would need to neutralize their liberal and anti-sectarian rhetoric to garner more support among the lay citizens. But this attempt at reducing anti-sectarian rhetoric has proven to (further) subdue and mute women in Lebanon. Although this cycle of complacency has historically built the women's movement in numbers, the meager effects from its complacent rhetoric has been met with growing tension and grievances for a stronger, more radical women's movement. Further, to recall the fragmented structure within the mainstream women's movement, its complacency has directly alienated and marginalized a generation of women's rights activists who rebuke the organization of a women's movement along national lines. Yet, when male, elite policymakers convince the Lebanese public that women are not educated enough to participate in political decision making, they are overlooking the main idea and undermining the progress women have made for themselves at the hands of a withholding political system. These assertions, whether implicit or overtly stated, are detrimental to perpetuating a patriarchal society in Lebanon.

This thesis argues that the women's movement is a continual force for influencing change on policies towards human rights and women's rights. But while this study does not aim to quantify changes in policy, the analysis of the case of Nasawiya sets to prove that a new generation of activism has emerged in Lebanon's grassroots community that may well be more effective in pushing for women's rights in the country. Of Nasawiya, I argue, this generation of activism is appropriately identified by the nomenclature of a transnational feminist movement.

6.2 – Answering the Thesis Question

Tarrow (2005) describes that the new character of activism will be concerned with borderless campaigns as a product of *transnationalism*, the latest phenomenon to affect relationships among states and civic society. According to Tarrow and other social movement and social movement organization theorists, the significance of the *new* transnational activism is its potential as the new political landscape of activism. Transnational activism is concerned with changing pervasive social and political issues that manifest as a result of modern-day conditions. This kind of activism is spatially oriented in the transnational sphere as an inevitable result of globalization and internationalism. Just as these forces have caused modern-day social issues, activists have also utilized means of globalization and internationalism to transform their adversities into opportunities within a movement organizational structure. Yet, the focus is not entirely on organizational structures within social movements, nor is the focus solely on activists, but the context of the transnational brings the state back into the purview of contention.

Ultimately, this study aimed to challenge the grounded theory of Tarrow's transnational activism. The example of Lebanon's women's movement posed a complex yet fruitful example of the ever-changing process of organizing in a state affected by transnational forces. If transnationalism exists within Lebanon, then this study has proven thus by divulging its effects on the identities of feminist activists, the emergence of a new political arena, and the fusing of domestic and international politics, especially in the shift of the mainstream women's movement to international heights through the NCLA-UNFPA partnership. Further, the case of Nasawiya has inadvertently shown that marginalized groups can profit more from a transnational

movement than refusing to seek assistance from larger, umbrella social movement organizations. Activists of Nasawiya have outright proven their ability to utilize transnational resources for the benefit of mobilizing a strictly national movement. Feminists of Nasawiya have broken the stereotype, that of muted feminists, to deafen the ears of their antagonists. Whereas, just under ten years ago, Bray-Collins (2003) assumed the worst of the women's movement in Lebanon and reasserted notions that "a stronger feminist consciousness" was nowhere in sight to resurrect Lebanon's women's movement from the deathly grip of elite male policymakers, today, Lebanon's feminist movement is active and diverse due to its transnational support from grassroots SMOs and the means of Internet-wide support from Diasporas and activists alike. A conscious raising feminist movement is undeniably at force in Lebanon and coming in clearer than before.

However, the implication of challenging the status quo varies ultimately on the level of mobility and organization between social factions. The other side of the undeniable truth is that women's issues continue to be second-rate concerns to the mainstream public. The very mainstream public further continues to support the confessional and clientalistic political system that breeds the patriarchy that stifles women's organizing. In the face of an upcoming electoral year, Lebanon's confessional political system does not show any sign of implosion, and despite increase in grievances amongst factions for a secular and democratic system, only carrots of reforms are on the menu. Yet, on the cusp of 2013, when geopolitical turmoil has heeded more attention than national politics, electoral reforms seem distant, far-fetched and unattainable at this time. A longstanding debate to enact an electoral quota for women in Parliament at this point seems imaginary. In the meantime, the mainstream women's movement will continue to function under the

NCLW-UNFPA partnership. At best, the NCLW-UNFPA commission is an artifice to sustain women's support of the sectarian system. At worst the NCLW-UNFPA stifles the women's movement by design.

6.3 – Lessons and Avenues for Future Research

The study of transnational activism relies on intrinsic and extrinsic factors of a social movement phenomenon. While the feminist movement becomes more visible, the study has proven that social movement theories continue to be relevant, especially the marriage of social movement and organization theory. These theories were applied to investigate the intrinsic factors of Lebanon's women's movement, and particularly the spur of a feminist movement. The framework of this study follows American contemporary social movement theorist (Tarrow, Tilly, McAdam, Doug, Skocpol) to identify the central conflicts within the women's movement that are 1) unique to the "Lebanese oddity" in movement organization and 2) and external contention that is extrinsic to sustaining the transnational political structure and definitive of the "new era" in social movement study.⁵

Where I believe an opening for research has emerged through this study is from my observations of the Nasawiya movement in reclaiming public spaces for a "counterpublic sphere". From the Nasawiya Café to virtual feminist web spaces, activism in Lebanon's feminist movement concerns activities beyond demonstrations, community-wide events, and international conferences or meetings. The concept of the "counterpublic sphere" is most relevant to describing the transnational activism in Nasawiya, wherein private and public spaces are reinvented for the primary objective to disseminate counter-discourses against the prevailing structures of Lebanon's civic

⁵ Crossley, 2002

society and its inherent attachment to the sectarian political system. McLaughlin (2004) describes these members as “subordinated social groups” who “within the context of a counterpublic...are able to offer interpretations of their identities, needs, and interests in opposition to a comprehensive public sphere imbued with dominant interests and ideologies.”⁶ Wherein the Beijing Conference of 1995 set a precedent for women’s organizing and a momentum towards transnational movement, the transnational feminist movement has taken example of the importance in utilizing communication across national borders. In the case of Nasawiya, the transnational feminist movement has taken an initiative to adopt political-economic practices into its counterpublic space. An inclusion of women and men, regardless of religious denominations, nationalities, and persuasions utilize the Nasawiya Café as a movement-sustainable project. Surely this space can provide an appealing narrative, but its function as a paradigm for non-profit, feminist entrepreneurialism elicits interest of further study. Can this paradigm serve as a new formula for a feminist political economy in Lebanon?

⁶ McLaughlin, 2004, p. 160; Fraser, 1997, p. 81; Felski, 1989