The Politics of Arab Pop: Arab Pop Music, Popular Culture, and Gender
Norms in Lebanon

by

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Abstract

On October 17, 2019, thousands of Lebanese flooded the streets to protest governmental corruption. Soon after, issues of gender inequality were added to the list of grievances and women began leading marches to oppose the socio-political and economic burdens faced by women. Rage quickly consumed the whole of Lebanon, including – perhaps surprisingly – many of the country’s biggest pop music stars. They marched in the streets, sung nationalistic songs, and participated in the feminized re-writing of the national anthem. Using the case of pop music in Lebanon, this dissertation examines how forms of popular culture intersect with gender politics. More specifically, I argue that pop music is deeply connected to politics and that many pop music celebrities actively work to promote changes in (and awareness of) gender and sexuality norms in Lebanon. I also problematize cases where artists’ actions actually reinforce and reproduce restrictive gender norms. In making these claims, however, I endeavour to remain mindful of the socio-political realities of the Lebanese context that work to impede efforts to promote and secure gender-based reforms. I am also attentive to my own heritage as a student researcher of Lebanese descent and reflect on how this ‘insider’ identity has come to shape my work. To guide my analysis, I rely on the insights of (feminist) intersectionality and highlight the need for nuanced understandings of power and agency. Given the seriousness of Lebanon’s current political economic crisis, I also discuss how popular music celebrities have been eager participants in the ‘Lebanese Revolution’ since its outset. Finally, I discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut Port explosion, arguing that some pop stars’ social media posts work to reproduce harmful gendered discourses, while others worked to give voice to the feelings of frustrated Lebanese desperately seeking accountability from their government.

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This document may bear my name, but I owe its existence to all those who have believed in me...

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Preface	i
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Methodology	35
Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework	68
Chapter Three: Gender Activism and Social Change in Lebanon	95
Chapter Four: Political Pop	136
Chapter Five: Culture, Pop, and Revolution	178
Chapter Six: A Sad Song for Beirut	207
Conclusion	231
Reference List	244

*So, here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here
never enough for both.*

– Ijeoma Umebinyuo,
Nigerian poet

Preface

Ethno-national identity, I have learned, is a rather curious thing – that is, how our cultural or ethnic histories line up (or do not line up) with the various state citizenships we hold. I have always felt slightly envious of my peers and colleagues who were able to answer questions about their identities without hesitation. They were part *this* and part *that*, but in the end, they answered – with unreserved certainty – that they were Canadian, and as such, belonged here and nowhere else.

I, on the other hand, have always struggled with ‘what are you?’ and ‘where are you from?’ questions. My experience has taught me that ‘Canadian’ and ‘Edmonton’ are often insufficient answers to those questions. At worst, I was called rude, because they were ‘just asking.’ And at best, the questions were rephrased, often including the word ‘originally.’ Either way, I have always felt that the assumptions informing those questions – however phrased – were the same: someone with eyes as brown as mine, someone with skin as tan as mine, and someone with hair as dark as mine could not have spawned organically from the whiteness of Canada’s prairies. So, I had to be from somewhere else because I was *too foreign for here*.

Yet, I have never viewed my presupposed foreignness as something embarrassing or shameful. In fact, I am fortunate enough to have parents who, since my infancy, have always encouraged me and my brothers to take tremendous pride in our Lebanese-Islamic heritage. They told us stories about the Islamic Golden Age and of the numerous innovations Muslims have given the world. My mother, for example, has always loved reminding her sweet-toothed children that Muslims invented the toothbrush. My father told us about the seafaring Phoenicians and how they traversed the Mediterranean, exploring and trading with the other great civilizations of antiquity. And, of course, they taught us to speak Arabic, and even now only speak to us in Arabic at home. We were each, they told us, connected to this completely separate world that had been our family’s homeland since time immemorial. But, Jamal, Lena, and Mohammed were born and raised in Canada. We have never lived in the Middle East. And Arabic was a second language that we spoke through our very thick Anglophone-Canadian accents. The Arab homeland our parents talked about was oceans away and, at times, seemed to exist completely outside our tiny Canadian universe. My brothers and I, it seemed, were *too foreign for home*.

It is through these experiences that I have come to view my ethno-national identity as a curious thing. It is difficult to feel Canadian when those around you have often assumed that you did not belong. It is also equally difficult to feel Lebanese when Arabic is only your second language and you have never lived there for any extended period of time. And while the Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo concludes that those with peculiar diasporic identities like mine are doomed to ‘never be enough for both,’ my own view is somewhat less grim. Instead of passively accepting my incompleteness, I decided to study it. The discipline of Political Science – as my

mentors and advisors encouraged and allowed me to understand it – granted me the latitude to study and better understand facets of my own identity. And so, asking questions about what it meant to be an Arab and to be a Muslim became the hallmark of much of my graduate work. What follows then, as my reader will learn, is more than a lengthy piece of academic writing. It is also part and parcel of my personal journey to form a more holistic understanding of what it means to be both Canadian and Lebanese, Arab and Western. For this reason, you will see that I have woven my personal life experiences into the fabric of this dissertation. You are, in sum, about to read a story that is both about pop music and gender in Lebanon, and about Lena Omar Saleh.

Lena O. Saleh
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You see, being an Arab and living in the Arab world today is like banging your head on a thick wall made of steely political, social and existential predicaments. You hammer and hammer, yet nothing changes. Except the number of bruises on your skin. But you have to keep banging on that wall from the inside. That is your only hope. For it cannot be wrecked, penetrated or torn down from the outside. And especially not by 'outsiders.' Change is not 'importable' material.

- Joumana Haddad,
Lebanese author

Introduction

On the 17th of October 2019 a movement began in Lebanon. Lebanese of all faiths, genders, and ages stood unified against the rampant corruption that had defined their country's political structure since achieving Independence in 1943. With painted faces, shrouded in the Lebanese flag, protesters descended upon downtown Beirut, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and President Michel Aoun. They chanted: "All of them means all of them!" But what began as a popular condemnation of draconian tax measures quickly grew into something much larger; it became a full-force civil assault on nearly every manifestation of socio-political inequality in Lebanon. Issues such as women's rights were quickly added into the mix, as women began leading marches and protests to highlight the legal and economic burdens faced by women – including domestic violence and harassment, unequal citizenship rights, and differentiated treatment in the country's religious family courts.

In the weeks and months that followed, rage consumed the whole of the Lebanese populace and no one was immune, including – perhaps surprisingly – many of Lebanon's megastar pop music divas: Nancy Ajram, Najwa Karam, Maya Diab, Haifa Wehbe, Elissa, Carole Samaha, and others. Turning to their sprawling social media accounts, some of the country's biggest stars supported the protests, expressed how proud they were to be Lebanese, and reaffirmed the protesters' goal of living with dignity. Some pop starlets took to the streets of Beirut, waved Lebanese flags, and chanted 'Revolution!' as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder with

their compatriots. Others rewrote the country's national anthem as a gesture intended to symbolically re-write women's place in the imagined Lebanese *watan* (nation). And some released ultra-nationalistic songs that celebrated what seemed to be the 'coming' of the new Lebanon.

It is these sorts of moments of intersection – between Lebanese Arab pop music and Lebanon's gendered political realities – that are of my interest in this dissertation.

Research Question and Argument

This dissertation begins by asking: how does the representation of women and gender in Lebanese pop music intersect and reconcile with the everyday realities of Lebanese women, and is this music (and its artists) promoting changes in Lebanese social and political (gender) norms?

In my efforts to answer these questions, I undertake a four-fold analysis. First, I endeavour to better understand (Lebanese) Arab pop music itself – as a largely unstudied cultural phenomenon. Second, borrowing from the methodological insights of “researcher reflexivity,” I endeavour to position myself – as a female student researcher of Lebanese descent – relative to a number of themes discussed throughout the work. In doing so, I recognize the subjective nature of social research and probe aspects of my own Arab/Lebanese and Muslim identity. Third, drawing from posts made by celebrities on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and other social media platforms, I aim to better understand how new media technologies are deployed and used by celebrities to raise awareness of political issues, to disseminate their views/opinions, or to engage with their audiences. Fourth, and most importantly, I seek to understand the relationship between popular music, its Lebanese celebrities, and the current lived realities of (many) Lebanese – while remaining mindful of extensive diversity of experience amongst them. Taking inspiration from (feminist) scholars working with the framework of intersectionality, I recognize the need to

contextualize women's experiences along the varying identity categories of gender, race, class, geographic location, history, religion, and – in the Arab world – kinship/family. I understand that these categories can have profound impacts on women's abilities to participate in conversations that explore, negotiate, and re-imagine femininity.

Guided by these questions and aims, the central argument of this thesis is that not only is pop music very seriously connected to gender politics in Lebanon, but that many pop stars actually work to promote changes in gender and sexuality norms in Lebanon. In making this argument, however, I endeavour to remain cognizant of the unique dynamics of and challenges posed by the Lebanese political context (sectarianism, for example). I also problematize the cases of artists whose efforts have worked to reproduce patriarchal or restrictive gender norms.

Charting the Multifaceted Territory

The review that follows begins with a brief discussion of Lebanon's recent history and politics to offer my reader – who may be unfamiliar with the country – some context for later discussions. I then proceed to begin a discussion of popular music, politics, and modern Arab pop. Finally, having equipped my reader with a basic familiarity of Lebanon (as a country) and Arab pop music as a genre, I return to discuss Lebanon's link to the popular music industry in the Arab world.

i. Lebanon: History, Sectarianism, War

Lebanon is a small, coastal Mediterranean country bordering Israel and Syria. Occupying only about 10,500 KM/Sq., the country is approximately 1/63rd the size of the Canadian province of Alberta. Despite its very small geographic area, the country has a long history that stretches back to antiquity. From the ancient seafaring civilization of the Phoenicians and their city-state

near Byblos more than 5000 years before the birth of Jesus Christ to King Solomon's decision to use wood from Lebanon's cedar forests as material to construct the First Temple in Jerusalem in (approximately) 900 BCE, the region that now includes (modern) Lebanon has witnessed amazing events and developments in human history.

A discussion of Lebanon's more recent history, however, could begin with the Ottoman Empire. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the country we now know as Lebanon was governed as a region of historic Syria, known as Mount Lebanon. It was ruled by the *Iqta'* system, which distributed tax-farming rights in mountainous and desert regions to ethnic and tribal chiefs under the supervision of the Ottoman walis (administrator or governor; Traboulsi 2007, 3). The holders of these rights, moreover, were powerful families known as *muqata'ji*. These families had control over political/judiciary power and subsisted off their extraction of the social surplus through collection of taxes and control over the land (Traboulsi 1997, 4). These elite families fought amongst and within themselves for access to resources in ways that worked to exacerbate both inter- and intra-sect cleavages (Traboulsi 1997, 4-5).

This organizational system was compounded by the introduction of the *millet* system. Under Ottoman rule, subjects were divided along religious lines into a two-tiered hierarchical system. In this system, Muslims were the 'higher' community, and the 'lower' – albeit protected community – was made up of other 'people of the book,' namely Jews and Christians. In this system, Jews and Christians were permitted to freely practice their faiths, pending the payment of a tax, the *jizya*. As a consequence, this system resulted in an important division of labour, whereby Jews and Christians – largely barred from bureaucratic and military work – would specialize in commerce, finance, and handicrafts (Traboulsi 2007, 4). The religious communities were allowed to operate semi-autonomously and their leaders were expected to maintain order

for the Ottoman rulers. Issues relating to personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, were to be handled by special religious courts for Muslims (Zuhur 2002, 178).

With the conclusion of the First World War and the subsequent collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a number of treaties and accords would solidify French and British hegemony over the Arab provinces of the Empire. After a period of fairly intense lobbying on the part Lebanon's Maronite elites, Greater Lebanon was given life on September 1, 1920 (Salloukh et al. 2015, 14; Traboulsi 2007, 80). France's colonial practices worked to reinforce divisions amongst the population of its recently acquired territory – a number of which will be discussed with a bit more detail in Chapter three.

First, with the promulgation of the first Lebanese Constitution in 1926, France opted to maintain the Ottoman practice of proportional religious representation within the country's parliament, cabinet, and civil service (Kingston 2013, 28; Traboulsi 2007, 90). Using data from the 1932 population census, the country's legislative body allocated seats on a 6:5 ratio favouring Christian sects over Muslims. (Interestingly, the 1932 census has been the last population census to be conducted in Lebanon until this day.) France also decided to preserve aspects of the *millet* system. They encouraged and promoted the establishment of separate religious courts to allow each religious community to govern its own affairs relating to family law. This sort of encouragement, moreover, extended a process that transformed the Lebanese populace into 'confessions,' or religious groups. (Importantly, we will return to these ideas in chapter three.)

Significantly, as part-and-parcel of France's colonial strategy of 'divide and rule,' mandatory officials sought to "cultivate an intercommunal collaborative elite" (Kingston 2013, 29). In their efforts to harness the power of landowning and economic elites (often families),

French colonial authorities introduced electoral reforms in 1926. The reforms not only required that seats be distributed on a communal basis, but also required that all eligible voters cast their ballots in their town/city of birth/origin. In practice, however, these reforms just created an environment where these elites could deploy clientelism to ‘trade services’ for (or ‘buy’) votes (Kingston 2013, 30). In doing so, the factional and informal dynamics of clientelism and sectarianism were allowed to penetrate deeper into the Lebanese state, making it even more difficult to remove, challenge, or to create more inclusive alternatives. Each sect came to possess several of these incredibly powerful (politically and economically) and well-connected families, traditionally known as *zu'ama* (*za'im*, singular; chief or boss in Arabic). Clients came to be bound to their *za'im* by a “network of transactional ties, where economic and other services (*wastas* in Arabic) were distributed to the clients in exchange for political loyalty (Hamzeh 2001, 172).

Importantly, many of the political dynamics put into motion under Ottoman rule and reinforced/exacerbated by French rule under the mandate would continue after Lebanon achieved independence in 1943 – particularly the elite driven dynamics of clientelism. Following Independence, Lebanese (Sunni and Maronite) political elites would cooperate to form what Lijphart (1977) terms, a consociational democracy. Under this system, political elites of each segment cooperate to govern the state in a ‘grand coalition’ (1977, 25-30). During the struggles to achieve independence from France, Maronite and Sunni political elites (namely, Maronite Bishara al-Khoury and Sunni Riad al-Solh) reached a gentleman’s agreement that would establish the power sharing arrangement in the nascent (First) Lebanese Republic. Known as the National Pact (*al-mithaq al-watani*), this agreement built on the data of 1932 census and French rule by maintaining the 6:5 ratio between Christians and Muslims within Parliament and the civil

service. It also reserved important political positions for Lebanon's various sects: the President would be a Maronite Catholic, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia Muslim.¹ Despite its informal nature, the National Pact would come to serve as a "supplement" to the 1926 Constitution and would carry equal weight (Salloukh et al. 2015, 16).

This power-sharing deal maintained relative stability in the country for more than two decades (minus a short outbreak of violence in 1958; Hudson 1997, 108). The outbreak of the country's Civil War in 1975, however, made visible the contradictions and inequalities built into the system and – more importantly – Lebanon's susceptibility to interference from external forces, namely Palestinians, Syrians, and Israelis (El-Khazen 2000, 132). Internally, questions began to be raised (mostly amongst Muslims) concerning the legitimacy and fairness of the 6:5 ratio of the National Pact. Shias, too, were experiencing a community-wide political awakening of sorts under the leadership of Imam Moussa Al-Sadr.² Externally, Lebanon was caught up in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following their expulsion from Jordan during 'Black September' in the early 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) opted to set up base in Lebanon.³ With this increased Palestinian presence, it was only a matter of time before an explosion occurred and it did in April of 1975 (El-Khazen 2000, 132).

¹ It should also be known that Shias were largely excluded from these elite political dealings. El-Khazen (2000, 40-4), for example, argues that from the time of independence until about the 1970s, Lebanese Shias were largely marginalized within the political system – symbolized not only by the relative weakness of the position of Speaker of Parliament (relative to President and Prime Minister), but also by the fact that they were only 'given' this position in 1947 after debate over whether or not it should be given to the Greek Catholic or Greek Orthodox communities. Further, under Ottoman rule while Christians and Jews were recognized as their own religious/ethnic communities under the *millet* system, Shias were subsumed under the Sunni category and not recognized as being distinct.

² While outside the scope of the work here, Ajami's (2012) work, *The Vanished Imam*, delves deep into the case of Moussa Al-Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon.

³ This is, of course, a very simplistic explanation of events and a full detailing of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict at this time is outside of the scope here. For more on Israeli and Palestinian activity in Lebanon during the Civil War, see chapter five of Sucharov's detailed work, *The International Self* (2005).

The Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990) would rage on for fifteen years, during which time the Lebanese state would lose its Weberian monopoly on the use of legitimate violence within its territory.⁴ Neighbouring states, for example, would enter Lebanon at the behest of various groups. Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976, declaring their intentions to protect Lebanese Maronites from attack by Muslim factions (Traboulsi 2007, 199). Israel, too, would enter Southern Lebanon in 1978; and Israeli forces would lead a formal military invasion in June of 1982 – in their effort to rid Lebanon of the PLO (Sucharov 2005, 93; Traboulsi 2007, 214). Further, each of Lebanon's sectarian groups would produce their own leaders whose vision of what Lebanon ought to be – once it was rid of 'aliens' and 'others' – was enforced by their own militias. Traboulsi (2007, 233) writes: "Militia power not only practiced ethnic, sectarian and political 'cleansing' of territories but also committed what Juan Goytisolo has aptly called 'memoricide', the eradication of all memories of coexistence and common interests between Lebanese. Instead, they imposed their discourse of 'protection' on their 'people': the 'other' wants to kill you, but we are here to save your lives." The Civil War would consume the lives of approximately 100,000 people and leave nearly one million others displaced.⁵

The Taif Accord – formally known as the National Accord Document – was negotiated in Saudi Arabia in 1989 and officially ended the Lebanese Civil War. The Accord, however, did more than halt the conflict. The Taif Accord rejigged the workings of Lebanon's consociational democracy by changing its ratios, not its underlying power-sharing logic (Hudson 1999, 27). The ratio of Muslims to Christians in Parliament was made an equal 50:50; while the President of the

⁴ A robust account of the Lebanese Civil War far exceeds the scope of the work here. There are a number of excellent, detailed works on the conflict and its causes (see Deeb 1980; El-Khazen 2000; Fisk 2002; Hanf 1993; Traboulsi 2007).

⁵ This statistic comes from the Encyclopedia Britannica. It can be found here: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Lebanese-Civil-War>. (Accessed March 25, 2021).

Republic remained Maronite, his powers were reduced; the Prime Minister remained a Sunni, but the powers of Cabinet – which he oversees – increased; and the term of the Speaker of Parliament was increased from one year to four. Significantly, Taif also spoke of the ‘special relationship’ existing between Syria and Lebanon, and (essentially) transformed Syria into the ‘umpire’ of post-Civil War Lebanese politics (Salloukh et al. 2015, 21; see also Hudson 1999, 31; Firro 2002, 196).⁶

By the early 2000s, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that Syria had overstayed its welcome in Lebanon. The adoption of United Nations Resolution 1559 demanding the removal of foreign forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of militias also increased international pressure on the Syrian regime on the regime to withdraw. Pressure on Syria to withdraw also increased following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and widespread speculation that Syria had been involved in plotting his murder.

On March 8th, 2005, a massive demonstration took place in Beirut. The demonstration was a show of support for the Syrian regime, its role in ending the Lebanese Civil War and maintaining the stability of Lebanon. It was organized primarily – though not exclusively – by Shia political parties, including AMAL and Hezbollah, with support from the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement party. To oppose the March 8th demonstration, a Sunni-dominated counterprotest was organized on March 14th. Though led primarily by the Sunni Future party (of Hariri), it also included a number of allied Christian parties. This counterprotest sought to oppose Syrian presence in Lebanon, called for Lebanese militias (i.e., Hezbollah) to surrender their arms

⁶ During Lebanon’s time as a ‘Syrian protectorate’ (from 1990 until 2005), the Syrian regime worked consistently to meddle in nearly every aspect of Lebanon’s domestic affairs, often with the assistance of pro-Syrian Lebanese political elite (Kingston 2013, 50-1). “Syrian operatives and their Lebanese proteges penetrated almost all civil, political, and security institutions and organization, creative coercive institutional edifice camouflaged by controlled, but only partially representative, political participation” (Salloukh et al. 2015, 25).

in line with Resolution 1559, and demanded serious investigation into the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri. Eventually, Syria would respond to international and domestic calls for its withdrawal and leave Lebanon in April 2005. Importantly, the parties involved in the organization of these two protests have come to form two political blocs – March 8 and March 14 – that now dominate Lebanese politics in the post-Syria age.

ii. *Pop Culture, Pop Music, and Politics*

Having familiarized my reader briefly with my case study country, we are now better situated to begin our discussion of popular culture, pop music, and its connection to politics. Such a discussion serves as a useful entry point for our work here because, as political scientists and ethnomusicologists have observed, popular cultural forms – music, artwork, films, etc. – are often dismissed as mere entertainment. As Tim Nieguth (2015, 7-10) explains, “forms of popular entertainment are rarely recognized as being seriously connected to politics.” This observation is affirmed by ethnomusicologist Michael Frishkopf (2010, 5) in his work on popular music: “[D]espite being deeply implicated in social, economic, and political networks, [popular music] is only rarely investigated by social science and humanities scholars, perhaps because music is often disguised as mere entertainment.” Even in the instances where connections are recognized, it is often to lament popular culture’s negative impact on politics (Kraidy 2007, 45). And even when scholars are able to move beyond these sorts of analyses and acknowledge a more robust connection between popular culture/entertainment and the political world, they very often concede that these cultural outputs – popular music, films, books, etc. – “very rarely directly and unambiguously inform political activity” (Korczynski 2014, 19; see also Sabry 2007, 159).

With regards to popular music in particular, scholars have tended to concern themselves with ‘either/or’ questions. That is, they have tended to ask whether or not musical outputs exist

to oppose or to support the existing social order. German scholar and social critic Theodor Adorno, for example, argued that popular music, at its roots, is inherently conservative, a tool of social control: “Music for entertainment [...] seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression. The inability to communicate at all. It inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people molded by anxiety, work, and undemanding docility” (1976, 270). But it is not simply that Adorno was a ‘snob’ raising his nose at popular musical forms. As Timothy Taylor (2016, 8) notes, there is utility in understanding Adorno’s work as a critique of and commentary on capitalism’s power to ‘encroach on everything,’ even music, totally absorbing its production and consumption. Thinking this way allows us to better understand why Adorno argued that through capitalism, the “alienation of music from man has become complete” (2002, 391). Relatedly, French social theorist Jacques Attali (1985, 111) has argued that the pervasiveness of music – in elevators, hallways, cars, etc. – has come to replace genuine socialization and interaction between human beings. Others, too, have warned of the “indiscriminate and imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds into every corner of man’s life,” arguing that “[n]oise pollution is now a world problem” (Schafer 1993, 7-8).

Not all scholars, however, have such a pessimistic view about music’s impact on those who consume it. A number of scholars have argued, for example, for music’s potential to create an alternative reality, or what Abdel Nabi et al. (2004, 238) call “an alternative public realm” or what Ray Pratt (1990, 22) terms “enclaves of autonomy.” Music, they argue, creates and reflects forms of community, but also forms of self-identity in the same moment (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 2). Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino (2008, 2) also argues that music and dance are integral to identity formation because they are often public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group distinct. Music, he continues, presents its audiences with an interplay

between the ‘possible’ and the ‘actual.’ The ‘possible’ includes all those things that we might be able to do, hope, think, know, and experience, while the ‘actual’ comprises those things that we have already thought and experienced (17). This interplay, he argues, can ‘awaken us from habit’ (17). The arts – song, dance, paintings, poetry, etc. – “are the realm where the impossible or nonexistent or the ideal is imagined and made possible, and new possibilities leading to new lived realities are brought into existence in perceivable forms” (18). Jacques Attali was so certain that music’s ‘possible’ could become the ‘actual,’ that he referred to music as “prophecy.” He wrote: music “makes audible a new world that will gradually become visible, that will gradually impose itself and regulate the order of things; it is not only the image of the things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future” (1985, 11). Similarly, Canadian musicologist R. Murray Schafer (1993, 13) explained: “There can be little doubt [...] that music is an indicator of the age, revealing for those who know how to read its symptomatic messages, a means of fixing social and even political events.”

It is this ability to reveal the ‘possible’ to its listeners that scholars argue grants music its real socio-political power (Khatib 2007, 30). As human beings, we are drawn to music for the various ways it can enrich our lives, collectively as we feel a sense of unity and belonging with others at musical concerts, and individually when we feel as though a song was written *just for us*. We come to gain sets of identification, values, and attachments from musical culture. These values, scholars argue, can feed into people’s participation in the public sphere and come to transform attitudes (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 144). Indeed, political scientist Daniel Shea (1999, 4) argues that the real power of our society’s popular cultural forms (music, art, film) may not be their ability to trigger direct action, but their capacity to “shape attitudes and perceptions over the long run.”

As cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 2) observes: “To argue that people are ‘empowered’ by their relations to popular culture, that they may in fact seek such empowerment, and that such empowerment sometimes enables people to resist their subordination is not the same as arguing that all of our relations to popular culture constitute acts of resistance or that such relations are, by themselves, sufficient bases for an oppositional politics.” The task for researchers, therefore, is to move beyond ‘either/or’ questions. Endeavoring to understand how music can be deployed by its producers and used by its consumers is only half the task (Korczynski 2014, 9). We must also actively question and challenge how music and musical performances can become complicit in very real forms of violence against vulnerable, exploited, and marginalized groups (Fast and Pegley 2012, 6).

iii. Gendering Popular Music

Feminist ethnomusicologists have taken up these tasks and have explored the depth and complexities of the relationships existing amongst a society’s gender structure, the various ideologies surrounding gender and the nature of intergender relations. They have asked how each of these factors influences musical behaviour. They have also argued for the need to understand the inverse of these questions. Specifically, they have explored how musical behaviour itself can serve to reflect, symbolize, or even challenge gender behaviour and norms in any given society (Koskoff 1987, 4). Indeed, drawing from the insights of gender theorists regarding the performative nature of gender (see Butler 1990), feminist ethnomusicologists came to understand music “not simply as a product of human behaviour, but also as an interpretative site for enacting and performing gender relations” (Koskoff 2014, 27).

The issue of women’s sexuality itself, scholars argue, stands to impact their musical performance in three ways: “performance environments may provide a context for sexually

explicit behaviour, such that musical performance becomes a metaphor for sexual relations; the actual or perceived loss of sexuality may change women's musical role or status or both; and cultural beliefs in women's inherent sexuality may motivate the separation of, or restriction imposed upon, women's musical activities" (Koskoff 2014, 37). Further, this issue of women's sexuality centers on a basic distinction maintained in most (if not all) human societies between women who are exclusively heterosexual and those are not. Females not in this first category – young girls, older women, shamans, homosexual and 'marginalized' women (i.e., those who may be of childbearing years but are perceived as 'sexless' for other reasons) – may assume musical roles that deny or negate their sexuality. Women in the first category, that is, young women capable of bearing children, such as mates, lovers, concubines, courtesans, and prostitutes, often assume musical roles that heighten or restrict their sexuality in some way (Koskoff 2014, 37). In the West, for example, a woman's 'musical talent' is often dependent on how well she lives up to the cultural expectations of female sexuality. Indeed, Wood (1980, 295) notes that for a woman to achieve success and popularity in music she "must frequently serve the linked economic and erotic interests of the dominant culture." In societies where males are (or were) the main patrons of musical performances, or where male-dominated political, religious, and economic structures call for young female performers, musical behaviours that heighten female sexuality are the norm (Koskoff 2014, 37-38). Recall the famous 1999 *Rolling Stone* magazine cover featuring American pop star Britney Spears, for example. Spears was photographed lying on a bed of silk in her underwear as she hugged a stuffed children's toy in her arms. In the photograph, youthfulness (i.e., symbolized by the children's toy) is combined with sexuality (i.e., the camera positioned/angled above her body and her underwear). But Spears is not a unique case. Lebanese Pop Star Haifa Wehbe's 2010 album, *Baby Haifa*, and the album's hit song, *El Wawa (Boo-Boo)*

offer us another demonstrative example. In the song's music video, Wehbe – wearing lingerie-style pyjamas – plays with a number of children's toys and asks her audience to 'kiss her boo-boo better' in her (famously) high-pitched, child-like voice.⁷ As female musicians strive to meet these sorts of sexual demands, they risk being trapped in what Wood (1980, 295) terms, a 'Madonna-Whore' dichotomy. In this scheme, female singers are praised and idolized for their beauty and voices (i.e., the Madonna figure), while they are simultaneously rebuked and shamed for violating the regulatory conditions associated with respectable femininity (i.e., whores; see also Griffin 2004; Jackson and Vares 2015; LeVande 2007; Lister 2001; Virolle 2003).

In making this point, however, I am not saying that women's musical outputs exist solely in the service of men or to somehow reinforce male dominance. Koskoff (2014, 40) notes: "Music performance can also provide a context for behaviour that challenges or threatens the established social and sexual order." Music, therefore, can be seen as a site of subversion, capable of offering women a forum for expressions of anger or sexual need. Ethnomusicologists have cited cases across the world – including the Islamic Middle East/North Africa – of women challenging taboos through musical expression. Marie Virolle (2003), for example, explored the 'Mother of *Rai*,' Rimitti.⁸ In many of her songs, Virolle argues, Rimitti has directly challenged longstanding taboos in Algerian culture, such as female virginity and subservience. Indeed, Rimitti's outspoken and activist singing allowed her to become known as the 'Rebel of Algerian Music' (Pareles 2006). Terri Brint Joseph (2003, 236), similarly, has examined Moroccan Berber society. She recognizes that "women are usually considered the most powerless members of society except for young children." This situation, however, does stop women from trying to

⁷ The video can be found here on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DItBupKxdPo> (Accessed September 5, 2020).

⁸ *Rai* is an Algerian popular music form, often associated with Bedouin culture.

reclaim some of their power. It is “through their songs that females [...] try to compensate for their powerlessness.” Girls of marriageable age are permitted to perform songs in front of their entire tribe/community composed with the purpose of mocking unwanted suitors using sexually explicit words and gestures, or to egg on prospective suitors. She argues that these songs challenge a number of powerful gender norms and stereotypes: that women are too foolish to hold strong opinions, such as ones relating to choice of a mate; that they are simply pawns used by men in forms of alliance-construction through marriage; and finally, that unmarried girls have no opportunities to form opinions about particular men because they are kept segregated from unrelated males (2003, 242). Writing on the case of Iran several years after the formation of the Islamic Republic, Laudan Nooshin (2005) observes that Iranian teen girls listened to Western pop music as a means of rebelling against rigid religious demands of the Islamic State. In doing so, she argues, teen girls transformed Western pop music into a symbol of ‘defiance, social freedoms, and the outside world,’ and often listened to it at underground co-ed parties.

The insights of feminist ethnomusicologists suggest – in line with the above discussion of popular music’s connection to politics – that not all of women’s interactions with popular music forms are ‘oppositional’ or ‘subversive’ in some way. Indeed, Britney Spears’ infamous magazine cover and Wehbe’s *Baby Haifa* album evidence this point. However, as the cases from the Middle East suggest, there is a history of women demonstrating their agency and activism through song – in ways that acknowledge the varying intersections of their experiences. That is, music offers Middle Eastern and North African women a site where they can (and have) launch(ed) an oppositional politics that seeks to redefine, challenge, or question dominant narratives regarding gender and sexuality.

iv. *Arab Pop and Arab Politics*

While Lebanon has been described as a ‘big motor’ (Hammond 2007, 174) driving Arab popular music in the Middle East, it is – undoubtedly – Egypt that has played the most crucial role in directing the trajectory of Arab pop since the mid-20th century. Following Egypt’s 1952 Revolution, the Arab nationalist government of President Gamal Abdel Nasser recognized the ideological importance of mass media and how it could be deployed by the state as a unifying tool. (For more on the role of mass media/communication and nationalism, see Benedict Anderson’s [2006] work, *Imagined Communities*). As such, Nasser’s government set out to improve radio infrastructure across the country. By the early 1960s, music from Egypt could be heard across the Arab world (Frishkopf 2010, 12).

Arab music during the Nasser-era (1956-1970) was characterized by a small number of state-owned radio and television networks, almost exclusively based in Egypt. This concentrated, state-sanctioned output had two important consequences. First, the intimate involvement of state power combined with little (if any) private competition created the first Arab musical superstars. The fame achieved by Egyptian singers like Umm Kulthum⁹ and Abdel Halim Hafez was unprecedented. Indeed, Umm Kulthum’s popularity earned her the title, ‘Voice of Egypt.’ (For more on Umm Kulthum, see Virginia Danielson’s [1997] authoritative work.) With so little variety to choose from, Arab listeners – of all ages, classes, and across regions – all tuned into the same broadcasts. Second, Egyptian state control over the dissemination of music in the region served to connect Arab popular music to the successes and failures of Egypt and President

⁹ Two points relating to Umm Kulthum are worthy of brief elaboration. First, in accordance with traditional Arab-Muslim customs in which it is taboo for women to sing in front of men – especially men outside her immediate family – Umm Kulthum father, in the early phase of her career, required her to perform on stage in boy’s clothing to convince the audience that she was male (as explained in Michal Goldman’s 1996 documentary film, *Umm Kulthum, a Voice Like Egypt*). Suggesting that her ultimate rise to superstardom in the Arab world was, in fact, a challenge to dominant gender norms. Second, Umm Kulthum positioning at the center of the Nasserist nationalist project connects her case to the expansive literature exploring the relationship between women and nationalist projects (for example, see: McClintock 1991; 1993; Yuval-Davis 1996; 1997; 2003).

Nasser, in particular (Hammond 2007, 159; Frishkopf 2010, 13-5). It is then, perhaps, no surprise that the so-called ‘golden-age’ of contemporary Arab music is often said to be the era of Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez. Their music represented the enthusiasm, hope, and promise contained within Nasser’s brand of Arab nationalism.

Being connected to the state, however, meant something very different in the post-1967 context. Indeed, 1967 stands out for scholars as a sort-of ‘line in the sand’ demarcating both the end of one era and the birth of another (Ajami 1992, 31). Egypt’s military defeat in the 1967 June War to Israel signified more than the triumph of one army over another. It has, in fact, come to symbolize the complete collapse of an Arab cultural and political reality. Nasser’s flavor of Arab Nationalism soured when it failed to deliver on its promises of Arab political/cultural unification, liberating the Palestinians, and ending the West’s imperial domination of the Arabs (Dawisha 2003). For these reasons, scholars now maintain that the loss of the War in 1967 had a dramatic transformative impact on Arab culture and politics. Political scientist Fouad Ajami (1992), for example, argued that Arab intellectuals searched for answers to the ‘Arab predicament,’ as they sought to make sense of the newly altered post-1967 realities. Outside the realm of formal politics, Arab Nationalism’s collapse also signaled a break with the traditional ‘high’ culture. It became another painful reminder of what the Arabs had lost in 1967 (Hammond 2007, 159). This painful break, it is said, was further symbolized by the deaths of Arab Nationalism’s towering musical figureheads, Umm Kulthum and Abdel-Halim Hafez, within a decade of the 1967 loss (Hammond 2007, 158).

These mournful silences, however, were quickly filled with the sounds of the ‘lower’ cassette culture of the 1970s and 1980s. While the state-sponsored music of the 1950s and 1960s sought to further the political interests of the nationalist state, cassette culture did not have such

strong connections to state. It only sought to cater to the unique entertainment needs of the Arab populace. This ripened the Arab music market, preparing it for harvest by private sector actors who would soon come to dominate the landscape (Abdel Aziz 2010, 79; Frishkopf 2010, 15; see also: Hirschkind 2001). In fact, the impact that cassette technology had on Arab/Middle Eastern politics is difficult to overstate. Anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006, 3), for example, has examined the impact of the cassette tape within the context of recorded Islamic sermons in Egypt. In the West, he notes, the force of the 1979 Iranian Revolution worked to transform the image of the Middle Eastern cassette tape into a ‘menacing’ symbol of rising Islamic fanaticism. In the Middle East, however, cassette recorded sermons have allowed millions of ordinary Muslims to express religious sensibilities and to engage in public discourses concerning “questions of social responsibility, pious comportment, and devotional practice” (3-5). Hirschkind’s insights into the workings of cassette tapes in Egypt demonstrate the important role of music and sound recordings for shaping socio-political identities and for creating spaces of public debate.

Further, cassettes – of all kinds – were low-cost, easy to produce, and could be passed from person to person through informal networks of listeners. This ease of both production and transport allowed cassette culture to exist outside state control and censorship (Frishkopf 2000; 2010, 16; Hirschkind 2006, 55). To this end, cassette culture was subversive. It allowed artists and producers to speak openly about various forms of socio-political and economic injustice and inequalities. In early 1970s Egypt, for example, the songs of Ahmed Adawiya were popularly circulated throughout the streets of Cairo via cassette tape. Adawiya, singing in his notable working-class slang Arabic, offered his listeners entertaining critiques of the living and working conditions in Cairo. His popular song, *Zahma, Ya Dunya Zahma (It’s Crowded, Everywhere is*

Crowded), is an up-beat, catchy song about Cairo's crowded, traffic-filled streets.¹⁰ Adawiya's songs became relatable anthems for working-class Egyptians living in the country's burgeoning urban areas. Further, cassette culture could target specific groups, offering each what they were looking for. Older listeners, for example, could very easily acquire recordings of Umm Kulthum, while younger listeners could easily access the fresh sounds they craved.

Youth audiences also came to be recognized as a lucrative market in their own right. They demanded shorter songs with upbeat tempos, simple text, and visually attractive singers (whose photos/faces were printed on cassette liners), versus the longer, slower songs popular prior to the 1970s. These new, fresh songs became known as *shabibi* (youth) music (Abdel Aziz 2010, 80; Frishkopf 2010, 18, Gilman 2014; Hammond 2007, 16; Marcus 2007, 160). The rush amongst music producers to satisfy the demands of the youth market also came to encourage television channels to devote more airtime to music programming. This rush to meet the demands of youth culture effectively gave life to the contemporary era of Arab pop and the rise of music video culture in the region.

Indeed, despite its much shorter history, it is argued that television (i.e., visual) music in the Arab world stands to produce 'very profound' social effects through the combination of auditory (music) with visual (televised images) perception because it allows for the capture of more sensory attention (Frishkopf 2010, 20; see also Abdel Aziz 2010; Hammond 2007, 172-3; El Khachab 2010, 265). These 'very profound' social effects, moreover, are thought to be amplified in the Arab world for two important reasons: first, given that the region has traditionally had lower literacy rates, auditory and visual mediums (cassettes, televisions, and later, online streaming services) have taken on an important social role (see also Abdel Nabi et

¹⁰ For more on this see: <https://www.khabarkeslan.com/articles/2017/8/23/its-crowded-and-there-is-no-mercy>. (Accessed October 6, 2020).

al. 2006; Hafez 2008; Lynch 2006; Meizel 2010; Pintak 2009); and second, “a growing social conservatism encouraging women to stay home, where television has become the principal conduit for information and entertainment” (Frishkopf 2010, 20; see also Al-Barghouti 2010; El Khachab 2010).

v. *Modern Arab Pop*

Our contemporary era of mass-mediated Arab pop music cannot be discussed without reference to the omnipresent *fidyuklib* (video clip or music video). Video clips are delivered on television through privately-owned, free-to-air satellite music channels that air clips 24/7. These channels include, *Rotana*, *Mazzika*, *Melody*, and *Nessma*. In the 1990s, the mass proliferation of satellite dishes in the Middle East (and elsewhere, of course) significantly broadened the reach of these stations by increasing their audience. This development helped transform Arab pop into the multibillion-dollar industry it is today.

Given their centrality to modern Arab pop music, it is understandable that video clips have also become focal points of debate and criticism. Although it will be discussed throughout this work with greater detail, several points of criticism are worthy of mention here. First, the genre is accused of being nearly *apolitical*. Most modern Arab pop songs display an overt avoidance of highly controversial and divisive political issues, such as religion, terrorism, democracy, etc. Rather, they focus on happier themes, like love and beauty (Hammond 2007, 160). Noting this, however, is not the same as saying that the Arab world has not produced politically charged singers.

Egyptian singer Shaaban Abdel-Rahim (nicknamed Sha'bola), for example, earned an impressive degree of regional notoriety for his controversial and politically charged songs. His most well-known song was perhaps his first, *I hate Israel*, written in response to the September

2000 Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising/revolt). In the song, Sha'bola sings: "I hate Israel. And Shimon and Sharon. [...] I hate Israel and I hate Ehud Barak."¹¹ Some of his other well-known song titles include: *Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin Bin Laden* (in reference to Osama Bin Laden), *Hey, Arab People* (in reference to the 9/11 attacks in New York City), and *Don't Hit Iraq* (in reference to the American military invasion of Iraq in 2003).¹² Importantly, in the case of Sha'bola, like Adawiya several decades prior, issues of economic class are significant in explaining his popularity. His use of informal, working-class slang Arabic and his own humble beginnings as a laundryman made him a relatable figure to many in the working-class. Indeed, as will be discussed later in this work, issues of economic class are also significant to understanding mainstream Arab pop music. While cases of politically outspoken singers like Shaaban Abdel-Rahim are significant, they largely exist outside the spheres of the Arab pop industry that dominates the region's musical landscape, in both popularity and commercial success (Hammond 2007, 162).

The second point of criticism that has been launched against video clips surrounds their blatant displays of sex and sexuality. In the age of the video clip, critics argue, love and romance – the themes of most pop songs – are reduced to a 'one dimensional eroticism,' that leaves little to the imagination of viewers. Images of scantily clad dancers and singers (often women) 'moving all that can be moved in their bodies' are an 'immediate assault' on viewers' senses (El-Messiri 2010, 166). Indeed, as we will see later, this was a point mentioned by my interview participants.

¹¹ Ehud Barak, (late) Shimon Peres, and (late) Ariel Sharon are prominent figures in Israeli politics and former Prime Ministers of Israel. The song can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF6N2OKo8rk>. (Accessed February 22, 2020).

¹² For more see: Arab News 2019; BBC News 2003.

This criticism, however, does not suggest that Arabs have never seen dancing before or that they are completely unfamiliar with processes that sexualize/eroticize women. Belly dancing, for example, has long been a cultural practice in Arab societies. With its explicit eroticism, it was strictly controlled and confined to ‘safe’ places, such as the backrooms of male-only cafes or private functions. Traditionally, it has been regarded as ‘low brow’ and dancers themselves were viewed as women of ‘loose morals,’ one step above prostitutes (Hammond 2007, 27). Video clips are doing, moreover, is taking this form of eroticism and making it very public by bringing it into living rooms across the region. That many pop starlets are also belly dancers themselves (or try to take inspiration from this dance form) also evidences this point.¹³ Thus, what was once strictly controlled risqué behaviour – the sexualized dancing of women in revealing outfits – is being normalized and made very public. But it is not so much that ‘dancing’ is being made visible, but that ‘sex’ is being made more visible – and, of course, commodified (El-Messiri 2010, 166).

Following this line of thought, we can begin to view video clips as more than short videos of sexy men and women dancing to upbeat pop music. Critics maintain that they are ‘providing the public with a role model, promoting a particular lifestyle that, in turn, typifies a worldview, one whose starting point is individual pleasure at any price’ (El-Messiri 2010, 168). In this worldview, men and women are reduced to their respective sexually charged bodies for commercial gain. Put differently, it argues that the human body’s sexual capacities are becoming the sole source of identity.

¹³ Prominent pop stars/belly dancers in Egypt, for example, have actually faced jail time over their ‘debauchorous’ and very public use of the dance form in their videos (Egyptian Streets 2015). Further, Nancy Ajram’s video clip for her song, *ma Tegi Hena* (*Why Don’t You Come Here*), I believe, suggests that the starlet has at least been inspired by the dance form – even though she is not a belly dancer herself. The clip can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBBxGHvjNFM> (Accessed February 15, 2021).

In fact, sex is one of the key battlegrounds in Arab societies between more secular modernists and Islamists. Mindful of this, it is easier to understand why Islamist groups and governments have sought to cancel concerts, ban songs, and called for harsh punishments to be doled out to artists accused of creating blasphemous music to preserve the Islamic nature of society and ‘public morality’ (Otterbeck 2008, 212). These debates, further, have an important gendered aspect. In the Arab world, Al-Mahadin (2011, 8), for example, argues that the woman’s body is a much contested and debated discursive space. She notes that it is not a stretch or exaggeration to argue that the Arab Islamic social order itself is both “subordinated to and constructed by the female body – specifically how that body should be regulated, landscaped, exposed, covered, disciplined or annihilated” (8). The female body, she argues elsewhere (2009), is the “ultimate signifier.” For the Arab (male) psyche, the female body serves as its point of reference. The female body is the point of anchorage for male honour. Similarly, Stowasser (1993, 6) argues, “the status of women in [Middle Eastern Arab] Muslim society is an entity of faith (a ‘symbol’), and thus has implications for the religion of Islam as a whole.” Relatedly, historian Margot Badran (1995, 18) notes that the common practice of seclusion of women must be understood in the context of societal stability and familial (male) honor. She explains that ‘the woman’ was “perceived as essentially, or exclusively, a sexual being, unlike ‘the man,’ who was only partly understood in terms of his sexuality. Women were held to possess a more powerful sexual desire than men, posing a threat to society because of the chaos or *fitna* they could unleash” (1995, 5). For this reason, her sexuality needed to be rigidly controlled (through seclusion and veiling, for example), as “women’s sexual purity was linked to the honor of men and the family” (1995, 4-5). Frantz Fanon (1965, 38-9), in his writings on colonial Algeria made a similar observation, referring to women as “pivot” of Algerian society. He argued that for

French colonialists, unveiling women (removing their headscarves/*hijabs*) signified a “real power” over the Algerian man. Mindful of these insights, it becomes easier to understand why a significant amount of the debate circling Arab pop music has focused on the revealing outfits, risqué movements, and the sexuality of women, in particular. In sum, it appears that pop music and the very visible sexuality displayed video clips stand to upset longstanding social/sexual arrangements.

vi. *Full Circle: Making the Lebanese Link*

Lebanon – discussed with some detail above – plays an important role in these gendered musical debates. After a hiatus during the country’s Civil War (1975-1990), Lebanon re-emerged as a hub for Arab arts, culture, and fashion in the 1990s and 2000s. The timing of this re-emergence was very fortunate. It overlapped with the explosion of satellite television and satellite music and meant that Lebanon could not only contribute, but that it could gradually become a hub for music (alongside Egypt). While statistics on consumption and profit are difficult to come by, Hammond (2007, 174) estimates that Lebanon – by the early 2000s – had the region’s largest CD market and that music sales were approximately \$30 million USD. This financial success is coupled with the fact that many of the region’s biggest (female) Arab pop stars are Lebanese: Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wehbe, Maya Diab, Myriam Klink, Yara, Najwa Karam, Myriam Fares, Elissa, and Nawal El-Zoghbi.

Lebanon’s intimate connection to the pop music industry likely stems from the country’s long (though complicated) relationship with constitutional democracy – in a region that has been historically dominated by repressive authoritarian regimes (Dajani 2013, 1; Melki et al. 2012, 9; Melki and Mallat 2013, 432; Otterbeck 2008, 217; Rugh 2004, 90). Indeed, *Freedom House* ranked Lebanon as one of only four ‘partly free’ Middle Eastern countries in its 2020 rankings

(the vast majority of other countries were ranked as ‘not free’).¹⁴ In 1956, Lebanon became the first country in the Arabic-speaking world to allow private broadcast stations to operate alongside state-controlled broadcast media stations (Dabbous-Sensenig 2000; Rugh 2004, 195). And Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution (1926, Amended in 1989) guarantees freedom of the press: “The freedom to express one's opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by law.”¹⁵

This claim about freedom of the press in Lebanon, however, requires qualification. While scholars recognize the persistence of claims (and elements of truth in) describing the Lebanese (news) media as amongst the freest in the region (Dajani 2013, 1), they explain that the situation is complicated by the country’s sectarian infrastructures since the end of the country’s Civil War (El-Richani 2016, 70; Salloukh et al. 2015, 136). As one of the stipulations of the Taif Accord, Lebanon was required to control its radio and broadcasting sphere that had transformed into something akin to the Wild West during the War.¹⁶ To this end, Law 382 of November 4, 1994 was introduced to control the chaos and continues to serve as the legislation ordering the media in Lebanon (El-Richani 2016, 73). The law did a number of important things. First, it reaffirmed the government’s commitment to media freedom, as outlined in the Lebanese Constitution. Second, it legalized private broadcasting in Lebanon, while simultaneously maintaining a degree of governmental control because channels were to be the exclusive property of the state and

¹⁴ The other three countries ranked as ‘partly free’ are Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait. Also, for reference, only two Middle Eastern/North African countries, Israel and Tunisia, are ranked as ‘free.’

¹⁵ The full English-translation of the Lebanese Constitution can be found here: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/lb/lb018en.pdf>. (Accessed February 22, 2020).

¹⁶ With the Lebanese state in disarray during the Civil War, private broadcasting stations (radio and television) flourished. Unbothered by the country’s (weak) state authorities whose limited attentions – understandably – were elsewhere, more than fifty television channels and more than one-hundred radio stations were free to operate in “complete anarchy” while serving as “direct instruments of political propaganda” for the country’s numerous warring factions (Kraidy 1998, 389-91; see also Kraidy 2005, 276).

could only be ‘licensed’ (*imtiyaz* in Arabic) out through the National Audiovisual Council (Salloukh et al. 2015, 137; El-Richani 2016, 73). In practice, these licenses were (and still are) distributed “based largely on a sectarian ‘quota system’ rather than economic or technical considerations” (Salloukh et al. 2015, 138; Kraidy 1998, 395; 2005, 288). Thus, the manner through which the Lebanese mediascape was sliced up after the Civil War essentially institutionalized a smaller, more ordered version of the sectarian mediascape that existed during the conflict. As a result of the law, the more than fifty television networks that existed during the conflict were cut down to only four channels (Kraidy 1998, 395). Each of the four channels that were first given licenses under law 382 were affiliated with key political figures and confessional groups. (El-Richani 2016, 76).¹⁷ Importantly, *Al-Manar*, known for being the “chief propaganda platform of Hezbollah,” began broadcasting in the early 1990s, though it would not be granted a legal license until 1998 (Salloukh et al. 2015, 138). By the early 2000s, these ‘original’ stations would be joined by the official licensing of *Al-Jadeed* and *OTV*. Independently owned by wealthy Sunni entrepreneur Tahsin Khayat, *Al-Jadeed* (also known as *New TV*) is slightly left-leaning and competes with Hariri’s *Future TV*. *OTV* serves as the mouthpiece for the Free Patriotic Movement, the political party associated with current Maronite Lebanese President Michel Aoun.

While the Lebanese news media is heavily influenced by the country’s complicated sectarian system, its entertainment media has – with a few notable exceptions¹⁸ – been allowed to

¹⁷ *NBN* is a voice for Shia political interests in Lebanon and is owned by current Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri. *Future TV* represented the values and political vision of its owner and late Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (and now, his son and political heir, Saad Hariri). *MTV* (also known as *Murr TV*) is owned by the wealthy Greek Orthodox Christian Al-Murr family. And *LBCI*, which had early ties to militia leader Samir Geagea and his Lebanese Forces party, represented the interests of Maronite Christians.

¹⁸ Lebanon does have censorship laws. Materials – films, written works, songs, etc. – considered by the Lebanese government to have defamed the President/Prime Minister, the army, religious clerics or the heads of prominent Arab states, be in support of/sympathetic to Israel, or fail to ‘consider the sensitivities of all the religious and

operate relatively uninhibited. This laxity has allowed Lebanon to position itself at the center of the region's immensely popular music industry. For example, regional pop singing competitions (*Superstar* and later *Arab Idol*) are filmed in Beirut and broadcast on Lebanese satellite networks. *Arab Idol*, for example, is aired on the Lebanese network *MBC*. This connection to pop music – and willingness to disseminate it – has also provoked the ire of more conservative Islamist politicians/governments in the Arab world. Indeed, in their efforts to condemn Arab pop music, they have launched “sweeping attacks” against “Lebanon” as a “source of folly and *muyu'a*” (spoiledness/effeminacy; Kraidy 2010, 128). It is, moreover, these sorts of tensions and intersections between pop music and politics in the region (specifically Lebanon) that are of my interest in this work.

Why Pop Music?

Trying to find links and points of intersection between pop music and Lebanese politics may, I admit, seem strange to my reader. My reader may ask: why pop music? Recognizing this, I feel that it may be useful to pause briefly and explain why I have chosen to examine pop music. I have chosen to examine pop music for two (somewhat related) reasons.

My first reason stems from issues of accessibility and familiarity. The mainstream Arabic pop music and its artists that I examine are both pervasive and easily accessible. Pop stars appear on billboards that advertise cosmetics or foodstuffs. They appear on television news programs. They join panellists on political talk-shows. Their social media accounts are followed by millions from Lebanon and the (Arab) world. And their musical outputs, of course, are just as pervasive. As Hammond's (2007, 170) quote from an Arab pop music producer reveals: “You hear it

political factions' in Lebanon are, at times, subject to state censorship (Saghieh, Saghieh, and Geagea 2010, 144). A recent example of the state enforcing censorship is the 2017 banning of the big-budget superhero film, *Wonder Woman*. The film was banned in Lebanon because the lead actress Gal Gadot is Israeli (Holpuch 2017).

everywhere, it's probably even coming out the taps." Whether one is a fan of this genre, a critic, or even completely indifferent to it, everyone knows what it is. Indeed, as we will see, diverse groups of Lebanese people – ranging from journalists and Islamic *imams* to politicians and feminist activists – are all able to identify the genre, its artists, and where to find it. The fact that the genre is now 'everywhere' is, I maintain, demonstrative of its importance. And, as noted above, this pervasiveness serves to connect the genre to a host of socio-political phenomena in the Arab world. Practically, too, for my purposes as a researcher, this also translates into rich sources of data and information. It is, simply, easy to find. Television interviews, social media pages, blogs and news sites, and the general population's familiarity with the genre offer researchers multiple entry points into its study.

The second reason relates to the Arab world's youthfulness and its connection to this genre. In his in-depth study on Arab music within the Egyptian context, Daniel Gilman (2014, 13) notes that the genre can be identified partly through its connection to young people. So strong is this connection that he referred to the genre as '*al-musiqa al-shababiyya*', or 'youth music' in Arabic. This detail becomes more significant once we consider the demographics of the Arab world. According to *youthpolicy.org*, young people are the fastest growing population segment in the Arab world, with nearly 60% of the population under the age of 25. More specifically, people aged 15 to 24 constitute approximately 20% of the population in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. If we also intend to take seriously the insights of scholars like Attali (1985) and Schafer (1993), we can recall that music offers its listeners the ability to imagine themselves differently and, in doing so, can reveal what is socially, culturally, and politically 'possible.' Music, in other words, can be 'prophetic' (to use Attali's word). Put differently, the genre could offer us a glimpse of a latent Arab world contained within the

aspirations of its youthful audiences. So, it is not simply that the songs, singers, and videos of Arab pop ‘speak’ to younger audiences’ values and aesthetic tastes, but also that these young people will very soon become the movers and shakers of their countries and cultures, and – perhaps – bring about significant socio-cultural and political changes that fall in line with these values.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one, *Methodology*, outlines the methodological framework and tools used for this dissertation. The chapter begins by outlining basic facts and details about my fieldwork in Lebanon during the summer of 2017. I explain that my thesis relied on the data collected from 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley. Noting that this data was incomplete and somewhat insufficient, I detail how I supplemented this data with multi-modal discourse analysis. Multi-modal discourse analysis argues for the broadening of conventional discourse analysis to include other forms of non-language communication, such as photographs, videos, etc. This expansion, I argue, rests on the belief that, just as language, visual images are purposeful human creations that can shape the representation of events or persons for the achievement of specific ideological ends. With regards to the research presented here, multi-modal discourse allows us to examine not only the words used by musical celebrities, for example, but also the specific photos or videos they choose to upload to social media and what information these communicate to those who view them. Finally, mindful of my own positionality as a student researcher of Lebanese descent, I explore reflexivity and endeavour to place myself within the research context.

In chapter two, *Theoretical Concerns*, I seek to address a number of theoretical concerns relevant to the work presented here. The chapter begins with a discussion of a particularly

slippery sociological concept: culture. Understanding that culture is difficult to define, the chapter proceeds to explore the related concept of ‘meaning,’ arguing that the meanings of various social institutions and practices are never fixed and always subject to debate and change. The chapter then shifts its focus to intersectionality theory. As a theoretical approach, intersectionality highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when seeking to understand how the social world is experienced by different individuals. In doing so, intersectionality directly challenges earlier (and problematic) assumptions about a universal, stable category of ‘women.’ The chapter also explores how these insights have been affirmed by feminist scholars of the Middle East who have argued that multiple facets of identity – history, geography, class, religion, and kinship ties, etc. – must all be considered to paint a fairer portrait of the lives of the region’s women. The final section of the chapter, through reference to an example from my fieldwork, circles back to the discussion of methodology in chapter one. I argue that the insights of intersectionality theory are complementary to the method of researcher reflexivity.

In chapter three, *Gender Activism and Social Change in Lebanon*, I endeavour to offer my reader more in-depth context on the workings of gender in Lebanon, focusing specifically on the efforts of feminists to challenge the workings of patriarchy in Lebanon. I begin the chapter by exploring the work of early feminists campaigning for suffrage and discussing the gendered nature of citizenship in Lebanon, focusing on the country’s nationality law and personal status codes. I then turn my attentions towards the post-war context, briefly examining the important contributions of Lebanese feminist Laure Moghaizel and her work to pressure the Lebanese state to ratify CEDAW. I explain, however, that the Lebanese state has maintained reservations regarding the operation of the country’s citizenship laws and the operation of its religious courts.

Building on the insights of earlier scholars, I also problematize the founding of the Lebanese Ministry for Women's Affairs, arguing that the Ministry, like earlier state institutions for women in Lebanon is unlikely to be a useful channel for women's rights promotion. This situation is also complicated by low rates of female representation in the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies. Taking inspiration from Laure Moghaizel, however, Lebanese feminists have learned to navigate this environment by creatively advocating for incremental changes. I discuss the case of *ABAAD's* campaign to remove Lebanon's so-called 'Marry Your Rapist' law. Finally, I very briefly discuss social media and its impact on activism in Lebanon and draw parallels to pop music, arguing that pop stars can – through their massive social media followings – quickly raise awareness about political or social issues.

In Chapter four, *Political Pop*, I explore the questions of how pop stars construct and display femininity and engage with politics. The chapter begins by noting that much of the criticism of Arab pop is that the genre is (supposedly) apolitical and that it promotes or encourages greater sexual openness. Using the cases of two prominent pop stars (Haifa Wehbe and Myriam Klink), I argue that even celebrities who are often singled out for their hyper-sexualized personas have attached themselves to Lebanese politics in various ways. Other Lebanese pop celebrities, too, have also tackled issues such as domestic violence and LGBTQ+ rights. Interviews with feminist activists, further, reveal that 'celebrity involvement' in promoting women's rights can be beneficial for spreading the message, but also harmful if the tactics used by celebrities are *too controversial* (such as wearing very revealing clothing). I also argue that even celebrities who seek to deliberately avoid controversy and politics by 'making good choices,' are still connected to very powerful (political) discourses, including the *normalization* of heterosexuality, making them complicit in their reproduction.

Chapter five, *Culture, Pop, and Revolution*, examines the 2019-2020 Lebanese protests in greater detail. After offering background on the protests' beginning, the chapter discusses the importance of social media and the internet for 'spreading the word' and granting protesters the ability to directly define themselves and their movement. The chapter argues that the Lebanese protests, once again, offer examples of Lebanese pop stars engaging directly in their country's politics. Additionally, I argue that the Lebanese protests, despite beginning in opposition to newly proposed taxes quickly took on a gendered component that highlighted the participation and sacrifices made by Lebanese women.

Chapter six, *A Sad Song for Beirut*, builds on the previous chapter, focusing on the events of Spring and Summer 2020. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I examine the gendered aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon and its intersection with pop music. I argue that while some pop stars have cooperated directly with the government to promote 'stay at home' messaging during the lockdown, others sought to do what musical celebrities do best: entertain their audiences. In doing so, however, it appears that the posts and videos uploaded by pop stars were devoid of politics, making little to no reference to domestic violence, poverty, or the ongoing protests across the country. These omissions, however, do not render the messaging and posts of popstars as apolitical, rather they cooperate to normalize and entrench an aspirational image of femininity with the potential to cause various forms of harm (social/economic/physical) to women who fall outside its borders. The second section of this chapter discusses the Beirut Port explosion in early August 2020 and examines the responses to the explosion from female pop musicians. Many of Lebanon's biggest (female) stars (Najwa Karam, Maya Diab, and others) turned to their social media pages to lob scathing critiques and attacks on the Lebanese government for allowing the explosion to happen. These critiques, I

suggest, not only demonstrate another connection between pop music and politics, but could work to act as a sort-of 'check' on the actions of political officials as pop stars raise awareness of governmental actions across social media.

*The body she inhabited during the day was not hers
but rather a reflection from other people's eyes.*

– Elias Khoury,
Lebanese novelist

Chapter One: Methodology

Introduction

During my childhood in the late 1990s and early 2000s, my parents – like many other Lebanese immigrant families we knew – had an Arabic-language satellite dish installed in our home. My father enjoyed watching Middle Eastern news programs because, as he always says, “they are less biased and prejudiced than American news.” My mother, on the other hand, enjoyed watching Saudi Arabian religious programming and Levantine and Egyptian dramas/soap operas (*mosalsalat*). It was, I suppose, a means through which they could bring pieces of the Arab-Islamic Middle East directly into our small home in rural Alberta.

Jamal (my older brother) and I, however, rarely watched Arabic television with our parents. It was ‘boring’ and hard to understand because the people often ‘spoke funny,’ especially in programming using formal Arabic. We preferred to eat our after-school meals while we watched *The Simpsons*, *Pokémon*, and *Family Matters* reruns. It was how we liked things.

There was, however, an exception to this routine for me. I loved watching Arabic-language pop music videos. I loved their outfits. I loved the dancing. I loved the bright colours. And, importantly, I found the videos to be both familiar and exotic. They not only sung in Arabic, a language I had heard every day of my life, but they also me offered an image of the Arab world that I had never seen before. I vividly remember asking my mother to ‘call me’ when Samira Said and Cheb Mami’s duet, *Youm Wara Youm (Day After Day)*, aired on the *Mazzika* network in 2002-2003. True to her word, she always called me. I would come running, eager to

sing along in my (broken) Arabic, while awkwardly imitating Samira Said's movements and poses – her emphatic hair-flips included.

Nearly 15 years after dancing around my parents' living room, I am now a graduate student in political science, well-versed in my field's longstanding commitment to objectivity, positivism, and the 'scientific method.' Indeed, the most prominent and mainstream methodological approaches in the field¹⁹ still seek to distance themselves from subjectivity as a requirement for 'scientific' knowledge production (Brigg and Bleiker 2010, 780). It is for this reason that political scientist Layna Mosley (2013, 10) notes that our discipline remains "centered at the positivist end of the [methodological] spectrum." And so, my peers and I were trained to follow in the footsteps of our academic predecessors. We learned to appreciate the legacy of King, Keohane, and Verba's (KKV) methodological crusade to make "qualitative research more scientific" (1994, 18). I was taught that it was not only possible to produce knowledge, independent of myself, my experiences, my subjectivity, and my values, but that this process could have no impact on me.

Here I encountered a serious problem. Did my disciplinary socialization mean that I should ignore or gloss-over my Lebanese heritage? What about the lessons – about myself, my family, and our shared place in the world – that I learned during my fieldwork experiences? Where did they belong?

This chapter begins with a more formal discussion of my (semi-structured) interview research conducted during the summer of 2017 in Lebanon. Following this, I explain my use of discourse analysis and how it was used to supplement the data collected during my fieldwork interviews. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of reflexivity as a methodological

¹⁹ Importantly, there are a number of scholars within political science and international relations who do probe and question that place of subjective experiences within the study of politics (see Lowenheim 2010).

tool that allows for the answering of practical questions concerning my identity, fieldwork experiences, and data collection.

Talking to People

While the business of social science often requires its practitioners to spend countless hours chained to their desks, hidden behind stacks of books, or staring at computer screens, this is not a wholly fair characterization of social scientific work. Indeed, there are many exciting times where we are able to escape the feelings of isolation that often accompany our work by entering ‘the field.’ During fieldwork, researchers are able to engage (even connect) with others because – simply – human beings are at the very core of the social phenomena we seek to better understand.

And so, armed with the simple belief that ‘people are important,’ I opted to incorporate fieldwork interviews into my dissertation. More specifically, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews in Beirut and Beqaa, Lebanon in 2017 (July – September). During this time, I conducted a total of twenty semi-structured interviews. My participants included: three journalists, five activists working with four separate feminist non-governmental organizations (*KAFA*, *ABAAD*, *Fe-Male*, and *The League for Lebanese Women’s Rights*); three federal cabinet ministers (Telecommunications, Culture, and Women’s Affairs); four religious officials (Muslim and Christian priests/imams, including Sunni judges in Lebanon’s religious courts); two philanthropists/social workers working with two different (predominately Shia) charitable organizations (*Al-Mabbarat* [founded by the late Imam Mohammad Fadlallah] and the *Imam Al-Sadr Foundation* [founded by the Imam Moussa Al-Sadr]); and four conversations with ordinary Lebanese women in the Beqaa.

Further, my interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes to about one hour – depending on the time granted to me by my participants. While many Lebanese speak fluent English and/or French, Arabic remains the primary language spoken. As such, the majority of my interviews were conducted in Arabic, though several were conducted in English. Each interview was then (in a very time-consuming process) translated into English (when necessary) and transcribed.

While I entered each interview with sets of pre-written questions that focused on my participants' opinions on women's rights, the relationship between men and women in Lebanon, popular music in Lebanon, recent developments within popular culture (such as pop star Myriam Klink's social media-fuelled campaign for Lebanese President), and their views on popular culture's impact on Lebanese society, many interviews (particularly those with other women) became loosely structured conversations. My participants' responses often raised other issues and topics, such as feminist activists' views on the appointment of a man (Parliamentarian Jean Ogasapian) as Lebanon's first Minister for Women's Affairs.

Reflecting on Conversations

While most social scientists would, I think, agree that 'people are important' and that being afforded the ability to go out into the world to speak with other people is a 'fun' aspect of our work, my decision to conduct interviews really does go beyond this. Practically, interview data (transcripts, etc.) have a number of unique strengths that other forms of data may lack (Lynch 2013, 37). An interview can offer insight into a participant's experiences, thoughts, and motivations that may not be available in the public or documentary record. For example, my access to academic articles, news stories, government websites, and even *YouTube* videos cooperated to help me build a degree of knowledge about women's activism in Lebanon and

recent events in Lebanon. Indeed, it was how I learned that Lebanon had recently created a Ministry for Women's Affairs. Without my interviews, however, I could not have known the reasons behind the decision to appoint a male Member of Parliament as the Minister or how this decision was understood (and critiqued) by Lebanese feminist activists. Interview data, therefore, helps researchers understand opinions and thought processes with a granularity that other forms of data collection (surveys, for example) do not often achieve (Lynch 2013, 37).

Further, structured interviews require participants to answer a pre-formulated set of questions and prohibit deviation outside the scripted questions. While this can certainly be an efficient methodological tool for researchers interested in very specific questions or for those researchers with limited resources (time, funds, etc.), it does not allow for the sort of latitude offered to both researchers and participants in semi-structured interviews. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews typically begin with broader, more open-ended questions or themes that the researcher wishes to discuss and explore with their participant. This flexibility allows for both the researcher and participant to engage in 'real' conversation where they can offer one another follow-up questions based on its unique ebbs and flows (Rogers 2013, 236-7). During my interviews, a number of my interview participants mentioned (almost in passing) that their organizations relied quite heavily on funds from private Lebanese donors (individuals donating to charities, etc.) or various European/Western-origin (non-)governmental organizations (*Save the Children*, the European Union, etc.). This led me to ask follow-up questions inquiring if any funding was given by the Lebanese state, what the organizations' various relationships with the Lebanese state were like, how the Lebanese government has responded to various forms of gender-based political activism, and the degree to which the Lebanese state was involved in the provision of social services and social welfare programs. In sum, the flexibility afforded to me

through semi-structured interviews resulted in a number of interesting discoveries that would likely never have emerged from a more structured interview format. Indeed, the data collected during my interviews has not only raised a number of other questions and research possibilities that, as I learned, may also require my attention, but came to form the backbone of my dissertation.

However, noting that I conducted interviews and highlighting their intellectual and academic benefits are both insufficient. When using interview data, researchers take great pains to inform their readers of who was interviewed, how many participants were recruited, and even of the participants' job titles/credentials. While useful, such reporting does omit another important piece of information: who the researcher failed to reach (Bleich and Pekkanen 2013, 85). Put differently, researchers are often in the habit of explaining who they spoke to, not those with whom they did not (87).

In my case, I set out to author a dissertation on Arab pop music and Lebanese politics but failed to reach the celebrities directly involved in the music's production. This experience is described by political scientist Kenneth Goldstein (2002, 671) in his discussion of elite interviews: "When all is said and done, no matter how good a job you do and how lucky you are, you will not be able to interview a portion of your target sample." Faced with these realities, researchers – myself included – are then tasked with mitigating these methodological concerns by 'filling in the gaps' by using other means and methods. Indeed, there are ways for researchers to come to 'know a lot' about those individuals who refuse to be interviewed or cannot be contacted (Goldstein 2002, 672).

Reaching for the Stars

During my time in Lebanon, I reached out to and spoke with several faculty members at the American University of Beirut. I wanted to hear their feedback, opinions, and insights. I also wanted to get their advice on fieldwork in Lebanon, media research, and things I should be on the lookout for. I emailed a professor in the Department of Gender and Media Studies and asked to speak with her about my project in more detail. To my delight, this faculty member responded and said that she would be happy to meet with me and discuss my research.

As we chatted on the patio of *Café Younes* on Beirut's busy Hamra Street, I told her that I had been able to interview a variety of individuals from different fields/background but was unable to 'penetrate' the music industry itself and, importantly, research the pop music celebrities I was trying to study. I told her that my 'cold calls' to offices went unanswered and my voicemails/emails were never replied to. I also explained that without an appointment, formal invitation, or a close contact to provide me with a *wasta* (connection/use of influence), security guards had turned me away at front entrances.

She nodded her head in agreement, noting that in the Lebanese context, interviews with celebrities would be difficult to come by for anyone outside that unique community, especially without a close connection. She explained, however, that from her understanding of what I wanted to accomplish, it seemed that I was interested in the popular culture industry's (and popular music's) public presentations of identity, gender, and sexuality. My work focused on what the popular music industry – and its celebrities – put out into the world and made public. This attention to the *public* and *broadcast* dimensions of the popular music industry would allow me to expand my research focus, thereby allowing me to include sources of data other than one-on-one interview transcripts. Thus, while I was unable to speak directly with Nancy Ajram or

Najwa Karam, I was still able to learn about them and the industry in which they participate through other means.

Arab pop music, as noted earlier, is an industry whose very existence is tied to technological developments – from radio and cassette tapes, to satellite television and the internet – and it is these same developments that allowed me to ‘fill in the gaps’ in the interview data I was able to collect. Indeed, using interview data as part of a multi-method approach is a common strategy for researchers seeking to build stronger foundations for their conclusions and arguments (Goldstein 2002, 672; Lynch 2013, 37; Mosley 2013, 3). Being interested in popular music’s public presentations of identity, gender, and sexuality meant that anything public could become ‘fair game’ for my analysis – *YouTube* videos, music videos, posts on *Instagram* or *Twitter*, interviews with journalists or television hosts, etc. Indeed, in the internet age so much material is now available for researchers to examine – even across oceans from their case studies.

More specifically, throughout this work I reference and discuss the cases of a number of incredibly popular Lebanese musical celebrities (Haifa Wehbe, Najwa Karam, Maya Diab, Nancy Ajram, etc.). My initial choices regarding which celebrities to discuss in greater detail stemmed from my fieldwork interviews. My participants often referenced certain celebrities by name as they explained their personal views on particular scandals or events. For example, several of my participants singled out Najwa Karam as they discussed women’s rights and domestic violence, explaining how they felt about Karam’s widely publicized opinions on the subjects. Relatedly, this sort of widespread knowledge about celebrities, I believe, is due to their massive star power. Indeed, the vast majority of the celebrities I discuss are not only featured on the *Forbes Middle East* list of the *Top 100 Arab Celebrities*,²⁰ but boast impressive social media

²⁰ The complete list can be found here: <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/list/the-top-100-arab-celebrities>. (Accessed March 10, 2021).

followings with millions of followers on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram*. Collectively, these celebrities are also very active on each of their social media platforms, often posting videos of themselves or their thoughts several times a day. These uploads are also frequently cross-posted on each of their platforms. This social media ‘activeness’ not only contributes to their star power, as they engage and interact with their fans, but also explains their infiltration into the minds of disparate groups of Lebanese – from Islamic imam and Christian priests to female activists and government ministers.

Additionally, the somewhat short list of celebrities I had assembled from my interviews quickly snowballed as I scoured popular (celebrity) news sites (*The961* and *AlBawaba*, for example) for more information about the stories shared with me by my interview participants. An article detailing a scandal involving one celebrity would often include links to another related article detailing another situation involving that same celebrity or one of their peers. Further, these articles very often included hyperlinks to *Twitter* or *YouTube* or *Instagram* (i.e., the platform where the celebrity had initially shared their view/photo/video/etc.).

Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis

The goal of this project is to not only to better understand the relationships and connections existing among the Lebanese state, popular culture, popular music, and gender norms, but to also understand the complex power dynamics and representations at work within these relationships. To this end, I supplemented interview data with critical analysis of the various discourses of gender and popular culture in Lebanon.

There is a blossoming body of literature within the social sciences and humanities that argues that researchers ought to consider the impact of discourses because they are integral to shaping realities (see for example: Billig 2008; Butler 1997; Fairclough 1989; 1995; Gee 2016;

van Leeuwen 2018). When I used the word ‘discourse,’ however, I do not simply mean it as a synonym for ‘language’ or ‘words.’ In his now seminal work, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), French social theorist Michel Foucault characterized discourses as complex systems of thought comprised of attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak (see also Lessa 2006, 285-6). Foucault studied the complicity of discourse in broader social processes, especially in the exercise of the power (see also Foucault 1977).

While the extent to which they draw inspiration from Foucault’s theorizing on the relationship between power and discourse certainly varies, later scholars engaged in discourse analysis begin with the assumption that human language – as the primary vehicle for the creation and dissemination of discourse – is intimately connected to the formation of what Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), termed, ‘regimes of truth.’ Regimes of truth, simply, are the multitude of discursive formations that any given society holds as true.

It is our language, discourse analysts maintain, that underlies struggles for power and control, thereby granting it the power to inflict very real forms of injury and violence (Butler 1997, 5-6). A critical examination of discourse (as talk and text) allows for the uncovering of how they are used to manage, hide, or even exacerbate a range of social problems (Tracy 2016, 365). This is why discourse analysts argue that, as a methodological tool, it is particularly apt for the study of racism, advertising and promotion culture, media language, and gender. In each of these domains, issues of power inequalities (between ‘races’ or ‘sexes,’ for example), exploitation, manipulation, and even structural inequalities are highlighted (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, 451). To highlight the processes through which language can serve as a vehicle for the maintenance of the status quo, Judith Butler (1997) cites the example of a doctor who,

upon delivering a newborn baby, excitedly yells, “It’s a girl!” In that moment, the newborn is placed on a path to experience “the long string of interpellations” through which she will be “girled” by her society. She will be subjected to the rituals and norms attached to her gender (49). Significantly, Butler notes that the doctor is not vested with some kind of higher power necessary to bestow genders on others. The doctor, like all others in their society, is simply being ‘derivative’ by reproducing a pre-existing concept/label/category (i.e., gender). Butler (49) asks (somewhat rhetorically): “Does the “one” who speaks the term cite the term, thereby establishing him or herself as the author while at the same time establishing the derivative status of that authorship?”

But language can do far more than maintain the status quo. It can also be used as a means to resist, rise up, and facilitate change. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), for example, examine the ways that the rise of ‘neo-liberalism’ required the development and promotion of new representations of the world. They also highlight how responses to and struggle against neo-liberal initiatives have been struggles over language. Our task as researchers is to “not only specify the threat, but also to specify emergent practices of resistance, and to discern possibilities for change” (Fairclough 2000, 148). In other words, critical discourse analysis does not simply seek to describe existing realities, but also seeks to evaluate them, assess the extent to which they match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just and decent societies (Fairclough 2013, 178).

Mindful of its somewhat narrow focus on language, some discourse analysts (Kress 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) have argued for broadening the concept of discourse to include visual images. Similarly, Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000, 461) note that critical discourse analysis is “still burdened by a very ‘linguistic’ outlook, which prevents productive ways of

incorporating linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of semiosis... [A] more ethnographically informed stance, in which linguistic practice is embedded in more general patterns of human meaningful action, could be highly productive.” Put differently, visual images – photographs, films, videos, etc. – can also be used to communicate information that we cannot say in language (Machin and Mayr 2012, 9; see also Roderick 2018, 161).

This conscious expansion of critical discourse analysis to include visual texts is formally known as multi-modal discourse analysis. This inclusion of visual imagery rests on the belief that power (and power inequalities) can be (re)produced and communicated in locales other than written or spoken language. In fact, images often cooperate with language to communicate specific choices by authors seeking to achieve specific goals (Machin and Mayr 2012, 9). Recognizing that both language and images are produced with intention, multi-modal discourse analysis is committed to a ‘critical agenda.’ This means that it acknowledges that visual images, just as language, will deploy strategies that appear to be normal or neutral on the surface, but may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular socio-political or economic ends (Machin and Mayr 2012, 9). Therefore, multi-modal critical discourse analysis ultimately seeks to destabilize ‘regimes of truth’ by critiquing and exposing the taken-for-granted assumptions and absences contained within both linguistic and visual texts that render political, social, economic, gender, and racial inequalities as normal or unremarkable (Roderick 2018, 154; see also Gibson, Lee, and Crabb 2015, 272). In doing so, it seeks to link “microanalysis of text to the macro-structure of society” (Wang 2014, 268). That is, researchers seek to link their micro-level analysis of texts (such as music videos, *tweets*, television or print advertisements, *Instagram* posts, etc.) to macro-level social concerns.

Multi-Modal Analysis in Practice

As noted above, it is not uncommon for researchers to be unable to research and interview a portion of their target sample. To mitigate this concern, researchers turn to other sources to fill in the gaps left in their interview data. For my project, this means that I was able to access a plethora of resources that could supplement my interview data. Put differently, I am not so much interested in the private lives of the celebrities who participate in this industry, but rather I am interested in their public personas and how they present themselves (or are presented) to their fans and the other individuals who consume this cultural output (i.e., Arab pop music).

But how does one construct a public persona? For music celebrities, the answer is primarily through their artistic outputs (songs, albums, films, etc.), interviews with journalists, and their social media accounts. Indeed, film and musical celebrities – of all national/cultural origins – are often behind the most ‘followed’ accounts on social media. Canadian pop music star, Justin Bieber, for example, is the second most followed person on *Twitter* with 111.5 million followers.²¹ American pop star Katy Perry, too, has an impressive *Twitter* following of 108.5 million.²² Lebanese pop star Nancy Ajram, for example, boasts an impressive 14.5 million *Twitter* followers and another 27.2 million followers on *Instagram*.²³ Pop star Haifa Wehbe, too, boasts 6.8 million followers on *Twitter* and 6.3 million on *Instagram*.²⁴ [For further reference, former American Presidential candidate and one of the world’s most well-known female politicians, Hillary Clinton, has 27.7 million followers on *Twitter*].²⁵

²¹ See: <https://twitter.com/justinbieber>. (Accessed May 9, 2020).

²² See: <https://twitter.com/katyperry>. (Accessed May 9, 2020).

²³ See: <https://twitter.com/NancyAjram>. (Accessed May 9, 2020). See also: <https://www.instagram.com/nancyajram>. (Accessed May 9, 2020).

²⁴ Sources: <https://twitter.com/haifawehbe>. (Accessed May 9, 2020). See also: <https://www.instagram.com/haifawehbe>. (Accessed May 9, 2020.)

²⁵ See: <https://twitter.com/hillaryclinton>. (Accessed May 9, 2020).

Through their social media accounts (as well as interviews given to television or radio journalists), celebrities engage with their fans, promote themselves and their work, and present pictures of their lives to their followers and listeners. Arab popular music celebrities are no exception to this. Social media is important not only as a direct link between celebrities and their fans, but also as sites where celebrities are able to construct public (and sometimes controversial) identities for themselves.

In doing so, some celebrities have chosen to be very vocal and explicit with their views. Lebanese pop star Najwa Karam, for example, has been a vocal *supporter* of domestic violence/violence against women. In a number of television and radio interviews, in addition to her personal *Twitter* account, Karam has noted the physical violence she experienced during her marriage actually ‘helped her’ because she ‘deserved it.’ Considering that Karam is a regional celebrity with millions of followers on social media, the impact of her views should be taken seriously, especially given their connection to discourses pertaining to marriage and religious discourses that justify or support various forms of gender inequality. While some celebrities have taken this direct approach, others share their views and identities with more subtlety. Nancy Ajram’s *Instagram* page, for example, is replete with smiling photos of her husband and two small daughters, accompanied by captions describing her life as ‘blessed’ or describing her husband as her ‘best friend.’ Critical engagement with these images and captions, allows us to view them as being *politically motivated*. They are, in other words, not neutral or harmless. By showing the world and her fans her ‘blessed’ life, Nancy Ajram not only connects herself to pre-existing and highly politicized ideals surrounding motherhood, heterosexuality, and femininity, but cooperates in their reproduction and continued dissemination. In this way, images and text cooperate to communicate that information to her millions of followers. It is not enough for

Ajram to *tell* us that she is ‘blessed,’ but we are actually offered a visual cue showing us what ‘being blessed’ looks like (i.e., having a beautiful, happy family).

Multi-modal critical discourse analysis, therefore, not only allows us to be critical of things celebrities say, but also expands the scope of what actually constitutes discourse. Through multi-modal discourse analysis we are permitted to include the images/videos that so often accompany text – particularly on social media platforms like *Twitter* or *Instagram*. We are allowed to dissect these forms of communication together and understand how both words and language cooperate with imagery and photographs/video clips to not only communicate information, but – more specifically – offer celebrities opportunities to perform, (de)construct, or connect themselves to various discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, women’s rights, economic class, and even religion. We are permitted to not only probe what they share, but we become able to juxtapose those comments, posts, and photos against what they ignore or take for granted. We are better able to understand how a seemingly ordinary photo of a pop star, her children, and her husband actually takes the ‘normalness’ of heterosexuality for granted and works (by reproducing it) to further entrench that sense ‘normalness’ and ‘abnormalness’ of other sexualities or other family structures. In coming to understand the ‘politics’ at work in these posts, we can begin to not only question the legitimacy of these discourses – such as those surrounding heterosexuality and heteronormativity – but actively work to destabilize them.

To this end, my critical analysis of radio and television interviews, *Instagram* and *Twitter* posts, came to supplement and fill in the gaps remaining in the interview data I collected, especially regarding the events that have taken place since the beginning of the protests in October 2019 (discussed more in chapters 5 and 6). *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and other social media posts offered me insights into pop stars’ understandings of gender and sexuality in Lebanon – not

only because I was able to read their captions or *tweets*, but because I could also see the pictures that often went hand-in-hand with their words. I sought to give (political) context to their posts by positioning them alongside the current realities of unemployment, poverty, or even discrimination against LGBTQ+ peoples in Lebanon. In doing so, I was able to demonstrate how seemingly harmless posts about their families, or posts that make no clear references to politics (such as a picture of a closet filled with very expensive designer clothing) could be understood as political.

(Re)flex on 'em

In the introduction to this chapter, I explained to my reader that my peers and I had gone through the methodological rites of passage in our field. The spectre of authorial detachment haunted much of my undergraduate and graduate training. And I, like many others in my field (I suspect), came to believe that Lena Saleh – as she lives and breathes – had no place in my academic work. Indeed, this belief was further cemented by my professors and instructors who insisted that we avoid the use of the word ‘I’ in our academic writing.

Years of this line of academic training within political science was put into crisis when I set out on the long and incredibly challenging journey to complete a PhD. I sought to conduct research on a community to which I claimed (at least some) membership. I struggled to reconcile my identity as Lena Omar Saleh, the child of Lebanese immigrants, with my identity as Lena Omar Saleh, the somewhat clumsy and inexperienced researcher. It was my status as the child of Lebanese parents that, after all, had inspired me to take up my project in the first place, and it was that same status that also imbued me with the background ‘cultural know-how’ to enter Lebanese society and be viewed by those around me as a fellow Lebanese, not as some kind of judgemental foreigner coming to poke and prod at dysfunctional ‘Others.’ As I saw it, one

identity could not exist fully without the other, but at the time I was unequipped to deal with this tension.

Fortunately, I was lifted up and supported by academic advisors who – through their own research and life experiences – were familiar with this sort of internal tension. In sharing what they had learned, they suggested that I embrace these tensions and deploy them in the service of my project. They made me aware of the ongoing academic debates regarding the disutility of a ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1986). As it turned out, many scholars were critical of works that remained silent on issues of authorial biography. These silences were not dismissed as ‘benign convention,’ but actually seen as a harmful practice that suggested a researcher’s findings stood above their subjectivity (Haggerty 2003, 156).

Inspired by the works of social theorists and literary critics within other corners of the social sciences and humanities (for example: Foucault 1972; 1977; Said 1979), sociologists and anthropologists began to question the underpinnings of their disciplines and how their knowledge outputs were complicit in processes of racism, sexism, and colonialism. This process of self-reflection compelled scholars to ask who it was that actually had ‘the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity,’ thereby problematizing the ethnographic project itself (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in *Works and Lives* (1988, 9), criticized his discipline for seeking to erase the authorial voice in an attempt to prevent ‘subjective views from colouring objective facts.’ Geertz encouraged his peers to understand that their intellectual outputs were always made for the purpose of persuasion, not as lenses through which they could truly understand people ‘over there’ (138). And so, qualitative researchers began to search for new models, methods, and tools to address these very serious concerns about ‘truth’ and ‘representation.’

These concerns have inspired some researchers to increasingly focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity in their efforts to better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge. These scholars pay close attention to how their own biases, beliefs, and personal experiences impact and shape the research at all stages (Berger 2015, 220). This strategy has been called, ‘reflexivity.’ Put another way, reflexivity can be understood as a process of self-appraisal in research, whereby researchers turn their ‘researcher microscopes’ back on to themselves. In doing so, they endeavour to locate intersections of author, Other, text, and world (Macbeth 2001, 35; see also Finlay 2002, 224; Horsburgh 2003, 308). Locating and engaging with these intersections (gender, race, immigration status, class, etc.) allows researchers to be better able to take responsibility for their own situatedness within their work. By thinking this way, we can begin to see how reflexivity directly challenges the (related) views of knowledge production as existing independently of the researcher producing it and of the knowledge produced being objective (Berger 2015, 220).

An important goal of reflexivity is to “enhance the accuracy of the research and the credibility of the findings by accounting for researcher values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases” (Berger 2015, 221). Similarly, John Cutcliffe (2003, 137) notes that sharing our experiences more fully with readers can make us more “accountable.” Reflexivity, therefore, appears to enhance the credibility of the research findings because it allows the researcher to account for their values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases in the explanation of a number of their judgement calls (137; see also Finlay 2002, 211-212).

Further, at the heart of the project of researcher reflexivity is an understanding of identity as something that is always under construction. Stuart Hall (1990, 222) characterizes identity as “always in process.” But noting that identities are unfixed also entails understanding that

identities are also relational productions. Hawes (1994, 7) explains this when he observes that the very act of becoming self-reflexive entails becoming ‘other-wise,’ meaning that we come to know that selves are identities only in relation to others. Similarly, Brah (1996, 123) notes, “[I]dentity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity.” Further, Reinharz (1997, 3) notes, “we not only *bring* the self to the field... [we also] *create* the self in the field.” Similarly, Muecke (1994) suggests that reflexivity is the dynamic and mutual influence of the researcher and the research field on each other. Being reflexive, thus, appears to demand that we interrogate the self that we bring into the field, thereby questioning the binaries, assumptions, and biases in our own lives that may come to impact our field experiences. But this is only one half of what reflexivity demands of us as researchers. We must also examine the version of ourselves that exits the field.

This last point, I think, is what one of my committee members intended to suggest to me when she asked whether my fieldwork and the process of writing a dissertation had led to any changes in my own musical tastes. I misunderstood her question at the time and, unfortunately, offered her an embarrassingly incoherent response. Nonetheless, I believe what my committee member sought to do was subtly encourage me to think reflexively about my own identity vis-à-vis my research. She likely wanted to show me that we not only enter the field holding particular values and attachments, but that we can come fashion new ones during and after our stay. The research experience, in other words, can come to be understood as a “conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself” (Guba and Lincoln 2005, 210).

Insider and Outsider Researchers

Reflexivity's attentions to the various positionalities of the researcher has inspired a number of researchers to (critically) examine the unique spaces they may occupy as both insiders and outsiders. These researchers, more specifically, are those who opt to study social context or societies within which they claim membership. Somewhat commonsensically perhaps, a researcher studying a cultural/social context with which they are intimately familiar will enjoy a number of advantages than an 'outsider' will likely not share. An 'insider' researcher will likely speak the majority language, be familiar with (or personally practice) the dominant religion, and will understand many of the nuances of unique cultural practices. An 'outsider' researcher, on the other hand, may not always possess this sort of 'background knowledge.' (Though this is a bit of a generalization, of course.)

Despite these advantages, being an insider researcher comes with its own set of challenges. Insider researchers must be 'constantly alert of and rigoursly reflect' (Berger 2015, 223; see also Drake 2010) on the ways in which their insider status may impact their research and work to keep 'one foot on the outside.' This distance is believed to be necessary for the researcher to critically examine their society/culture/etc. Kacen and Chaitin (2006, 211) observe: "When the researcher is part of the context s/he must be able to both get close enough to the population and site that s/he wishes to research, yet keep enough of a distance in order to be able to see needed, different, and nuanced perspectives on the topic of inquiry." Similarly, Eppley (2006) notes:

Insider/outsider positions are socially constructed and entail a high level of fluidity that further impacts a research situation. A researcher, by nature, has to have some level of "outside-ness" in order to conduct research. This does not mean that the inside perspective is surrendered; both exist simultaneously. There is othering in the very act of studying, a necessary stepping back or distancing in varying degrees. There can be no interpreting without some degree of othering.

These somewhat murky waters of positionality are made even cloudier when researchers come to understand that their research participants are also positioning them vis-à-vis their own understanding of the researcher's characteristics (Brayboy 2000, 420; see also Warren 1985, 19; Williams 2005, 165). These characteristics can include the researcher's gender, age, sexuality, class, religion, race, etc. Indeed, Dunya Abdulla Ahmed describes this process during her fieldwork interviews in Bahrain (Ahmed, Lewando Hundt, and Blackburn 2010). She explains that while she was seen as an insider due to her own status as a Bahraini citizen, she was more of an insider with Sunni Muslims because they used 'we' for Sunnis and referred to Shia Muslims as 'they.' She also notes that Sunnis appeared to be more comfortable talking about Shias (with her), whereas Shias had comparatively fewer comments to make (to her) about Sunnis. She explains that this may have been because her participants (both Sunni and Shia) perceived her to be Sunni (Ahmed, Lewando Hundt, and Blackburn 2010, 472). Ahmed also explores the complications associated with her gender. She explained that while she chooses to wear the Islamic *hijab* (headscarf/veil) in her day-to-day life, she was still required to "dress differently in different places," specifically places where she would be interviewing men who would, most likely, find other forms of dress to be inappropriate (Ahmed, Lewando Hundt, and Blackburn 2010, 475). Dressing differently, she explains, meant that she was occasionally required to go without makeup or wear an *abaya* (cloak or long coat) over her clothes to better fit into the norms of (regulatory) femininity within the Islamic Gulf country.

These examples offer us a window into understanding how research participants may work to position the researcher. This positioning, in turn, stands to impact the sort of interaction participants have with the researcher. Indeed, Rebecca Horn (1997, 299-300; see also Kosygina 2005, 88-90; Pini 2005, 202-3) notes that (male) research participants may view young female

researchers as harmless or non-threatening and this, in turn, may grant female researchers access to spaces that a male researcher may be unable to access. This view of the female researcher as ‘harmless’ may also lead participants to disclose information that they would otherwise not share with a man. On the other hand, when participants recognize the researcher as an ‘insider,’ they may withhold information because they assume it would be obvious to the researcher (Berger 2015, 224). Relatedly, as appeared to be the case with Ahmed’s work (discussed above), participants may recognize the researcher as an incomplete or partial insider. Viewing the researcher this way could motivate participants to act defensively and withhold information because, for example, they do not want to cause offense.

Long Looks in the Mirror

Through reading the insights of female scholars like Ahmed, Lewando Hundt, and Blackburn (2010), I came to reflect more seriously on my own fieldwork experiences and positionality. I began asking myself difficult questions about moments and experiences that, at the time they took place, seemed perfectly normal to me and, therefore, were easily dismissed. But it is those very same moments that reflexivity encourages us to interrogate. How, for example, did my gender impact the work I wanted to do? What about the way I looked? Or what about my privileged socio-economic positioning as a Canadian graduate student afforded the opportunity of travelling across the world? What about *wastas*?

As with any introspective activity (I imagine), I came to learn that asking these questions is no easy task. In fact, it is an incredibly difficult process – particularly when one is largely unaccustomed to talking (and writing) about deeply personal matters in public spaces. Macbeth (2001, 37) describes the difficulty of this introspective academic endeavour, saying that it is “as though we would need to learn how to speak and describe and read and write all over again.”

Dodgson (2019, 220), while recognizing the need for and importance of reflexivity, too, concedes that ‘reflexive practice can be some of the most challenging work in qualitative research.’ Pillow (2003, 187) also notes that reflexivity is an ‘uncomfortable’ process. Rather than scaring us, however, this discomfort should be seen as motivation for us (as researchers) to continue trying to expand the qualitative research arena. Thus, as a student still navigating the “swamp” of reflexive qualitative research (Finlay 2002), I endeavour to address to the questions I posed at the beginning of this section and examine how different facets of my identity overlapped and intersected.

i. Gender

My Lebanese parents went to (and continue to) go to great pains to ensure that each of their children had good manners (*adab*). We knew how to refer to our elders properly and respectfully. We knew to never enter someone else’s home empty handed. And, of course, we knew the standard Islamic greetings and when to use them. This sort of basic ‘background knowledge’ proved invaluable during my fieldwork. At a base level, I functioned without causing serious offense. But my parents also made sure I understood that I was subject to a separate code of etiquette and decorum from my brothers. There were additional expectations placed on me simply because I was female (and we were Muslim). My knowledge of this separate code, too, assisted with my fieldwork, often highlighting moments of intersection between religion and gender.

While I identify as a Sunni Muslim, my day-to-day existence is somewhat secular. Many women in my family (of differing ages) choose to wear the *hijab*, for example, but I do not. I also do not always adhere to the more reserved dress codes required of women in Islam. But my knowledge of their existence and my understanding of them became important. During my

fieldwork, as noted above, I conducted several interviews with imams. These were men – approximately the same age as my father (or older) – who had chosen to dedicate their lives to the study and practice of Islam. Something about the idea of sitting before them as a young, unmarried female with my hair uncovered and shoulders/arms exposed made me feel very uncomfortable. I knew it would be wrong. Thus, for the duration of each of my interviews with Islamic religious officials, I wore the *hijab* and dressed modestly. The positioning here is twofold. First, I sought to position myself more firmly (or visibly) within the Sunni Islamic community to which I already belonged. It is also worth noting that no one told me to do this. In fact, my own mother was very surprised when I first asked to borrow one of her headscarves but agreed that it would be disrespectful to remain unveiled in their presence. Second, I feel that my research participants – having been given the opportunity to literally see me as a member of their community via the *hijab* – may have been better able to perceive me as an ‘insider’ who shared (or would be sympathetic to) their worldviews.

Relatedly, to avoid upsetting norms surrounding respectable femininity, I never conducted interviews with men alone. My mother, uncles, or male cousins were always in the room with me. This form of supervision, rather than skewing my interview data, I believe, had the opposite effect. It showed my participants that there were people who were responsible for me and, by association, enhanced my ‘insider’ status. My need for supervision combined with my age, I think, also allowed my male participants to lower their guard because they viewed me as young and non-threatening. This element of being non-threatening, too, I believe was enhanced when I shared the same religious sect as my participants. Male participants who were Shia or Christian delicately addressed issues of sectarian differences, while some Sunni male participants took some more liberties with comments made about other religious groups in

Lebanon. One Sunni participant, for example, explained to me that Shia neighbourhoods in South Beirut where were ‘all the problems were concentrated,’ noting that so many *haram* (forbidden) things happened in those areas, including the practice of *Nika Mut’ah* (pleasure marriages), abortions, and electricity theft. These comments not only serve to highlight the continued importance of sectarianism within the country, but also reveal that these participants experienced the comfort necessary to make such comments in front of me.

Importantly, my interviews with women often lacked the sort of formality that characterized my interactions with men. Female participants, often ones who were near my mother’s age (or older), made comments about how well I spoke Arabic and my ‘cute’ accent. These remarks often went hand-in-hand with compliments to my mother for teaching me to speak so well. Many of these women, interestingly, also concluded our interviews with well wishes: “*Inshallah* (God willing) you will do well,” and “You will make us proud.”

While my interviews with younger women – many of whom were around my age – included far fewer remarks about my ‘cute’ accent or my mother’s good sense to teach her children Arabic, they were still very informal. They felt more like casual meetings with women who, in another context, could have easily been my friends or classmates. Some of my younger female interviewees were Muslim, but like me, none covered their hair. This shared element of secularism, too, could have worked to put my participants at ease as they may have felt more able to make negative comments about the various religious institutions in Lebanon, including the religious courts and their handlings of divorces, custody, etc.

My interview experiences with women also appear to mirror the observations made by other female researchers who have interviewed other women. Finch (1984), for example, has observed that when both the interviewer and interviewee are women, the setting can become

more informal, whereby their shared gender promotes the establishment of trust (see also Malyutina 2014). In discussing their experiences as young female researchers interviewing older women, Jen, Zhou, and Jeong (2020) note that their interview participants often referenced how their shared identities as women linked their experiences across age and cohort. They also explain that their interviews with older women were often marked by a theme of demonstrating care, whereby their participants expressed concern for their academic and career goals (761).

Reflecting back on what possible impact my gender may have had on my interview experiences and interaction with participants serves to draw our attention to the intersections between various facets of identity. In many contexts, it was not merely my gender that impacted how situations played out, but its interaction with my age and religion (or my perceived level of religiosity).

ii. *“Whiteness”*

In Canada, I am routinely described (using our government’s seemingly friendly, sanitized language) as a ‘visible minority’ (see also Brah 1996, 186). I have become very familiar with the uninvited and unwanted intrusions of inquisitive strangers with their questions about my origins. They ask these questions, of course, because I am ‘visibly’ different (read: not white). Perhaps as a bizarre coping strategy or as an effort to justify my existence, I have often chosen to dismiss these microaggressions as an unfortunate issue of numbers. People who look like me are, after all, a numerical minority within Canada’s population. But if there were more people who looked like me, the problem would simply disappear. The racism I experienced, therefore, was just a painful tax that ‘visible minorities’ were asked to pay for choosing to exist in a place that was not really their home. In short, growing up in Canada has made me keenly aware of how much looks matter.

Looks matter, Brah (1996, 3) argues, because the politics of race and racism are constituted by varying discourses about physical human bodies. Racialized power, she continues, operates both in and through physical bodies. Significantly, the inequalities created and reproduced by racism not only operate between the dominant and subordinate categories of people (whites and ‘visible minorities’ in Canada; European colonizer and colonized Other; etc.), but among the subordinate groups themselves as they are ranked based on their proximity to the white ideal. Brah (1996, 1-3) characterizes this hierarchy as the ‘colonial sandwich,’ wherein white Europeans are at the top, peoples of diverse Asian descents are in the middle, and Africans are at the bottom.

My fieldwork in Lebanon is set against this (experiential) backdrop. The prospect of travelling to Lebanon excited me. It was both an adventure and a sort-of homecoming. Indeed, I realized fairly quickly upon my arrival that I was able to move around – inside stores, on the street, at restaurants, etc. – with a sort of invisibility that I had never felt in Canada. My physical appearance suggested to those around me that I belonged there. I was finally experiencing what it was like to be part of the majority. But this was not the only way that ‘looks mattered.’

My olive skin and curly hair– traits that had always made me ‘visibly’ different in Canada – became more pronounced after a summer spent mostly outdoors. My skin tanned and I became several shades ‘darker,’ while my curly hair (responding tragically to the humidity) dramatically increased in volume. These subtle changes in my appearance brought about a barrage of (mostly negative) comments from family, friends, and even strangers. My darkness was routinely juxtaposed against the whiteness of one of my cousins. I was disparagingly described as being *samrah* (brown/tanned), while her naturally blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes made her beautiful. Further, that these sorts of comments are rarely (if ever) used to target

or describe men also highlights the ways that racism and racist projects construct/imagine the female gender differently from the male gender (Brah 1996, 154).

My point here is not to merely condemn the rudeness of such comments or having been compared to my cousin. Rather, I seek to reflect on my positionality in those moments. I may have belonged to the majority, but I came to understand the nuances of where I was being placed within its internal hierarchies that were ordered around whiteness. I came to understand how forms of internalized racism could draw racialized groups to praise or idealize traits commonly found within European populations. Blue eyes were better than brown ones; blonde hair was better than black hair; and white skin was better than dark skin.

While this is a limited example of my own experiences within an environment where I was part of the majority, the harsh exploitation and mistreatment experienced by some (often African) domestic workers in Lebanon is incomparably more egregious. While it is outside the scope here, it should be noted that many of these workers (often women) are subjected to slurs, segregation, and even racist depictions (Durmaz 2020). This, too, works to make more visible Lebanon's internal hierarchies ordered around race and whiteness. These internal hierarchies, moreover, are maintained and reproduced not only in ordinary conversation – as I am '*samrah*' and Black domestic workers are '*abeed*' (servant or slave in Arabic; often used a slur) – but by a complicated network of related industries, such as cosmetic surgery, television programs and other advertising that feature 'white-looking' models/actors, and, of course, the popular music industry discussed throughout this dissertation.

iii. Social and Financial Resources

From a practical position, my socio-economic class has had a significant impact on my fieldwork and research experiences. I am, of course, an economically privileged graduate student

from a Global North country with access to the financial resources necessary to travel across the world. These benefits, however, were compounded by the ‘local’ social resources I was able to access in Lebanon, namely *wasta*. I will dwell on this – until now – taken-for-granted term briefly as a way of exploring my own positionality.

My earlier discussion of Lebanon’s politics in the introduction to this work explained that Lebanon is technically a republic with all the trappings of a democratic state, including a parliament and a formal constitution. These *formal* processes of the state (to the degree that they function – as we will see later) are paralleled by *informal* brokerage processes, known as *wasta*. As part and parcel of the clientelist thread that has been woven into Lebanon’s social and political networks for generations, *wasta* is ‘how things get done’ in Lebanon. These things can include finding a job or even securing interview participants. Through their control of important state resources, political elites in Lebanon operate as the ‘gatekeepers’ to these resources, distributing them – often – along sectarian lines (Johnson 1977). *Wasta* can be understood as an important dimension of life in Lebanon – for all social and economic classes (Joseph 1983, 11). *Wastas*, moreover, are both sustained and accessed by complicated and overlapping networks connecting kin, friendship, neighbourhoods, and – of course – sect.

While a detailed account of the use of *wasta* exceeds the scope of my work here and much has been written about it in other contexts, my ability to access and secure interview participants was heavily influenced by *wasta*. With few direct research connections in Lebanon and my ‘cold-call’ strategy having collapsed entirely, I turned to the resources that I could mobilize: my middle-class (Sunni) Muslim family and their connections.

My maternal uncle, for example, is a high-ranking military official. One evening he had invited a colleague of equal rank (and of the same sect) to my grandfather’s home for coffee.

When I entered, my uncle introduced me as his niece who was ‘studying for her PhD about women’s rights.’ Perhaps as an indication of my uncle’s comprehensive understanding of *wasta*, his next sentence was: “Do you know anyone she could talk to?” My uncle’s friend said that he did not *directly*, but that he was close friends with an advisor of Jean Ogasapian, the Lebanese Minister for Women’s Affairs. My uncle’s colleague turned to me and asked if speaking to the Minister would be helpful. And I, of course, said yes. Several days later, my uncle received a telephone call from his colleague with a date and time for my interview with the Minister in Beirut.

Just as my uncle’s connections had helped me secure an elite interview, I also relied on my father’s connections. Prior to immigrating to Canada in the 1970s, my father was a political science student at the Lebanese University in Beirut and also the principal of the high school in El Marj. One of my father’s close university peers had, in the years since they were classmates, retired from his law practice and taken up a position as advisor for (Sunni) Minister Jamal Jarrah, the Lebanese Minister of Telecommunications. Minister Jarrah, interestingly enough, also hails from El Marj and the Jarrah family home is adjacent to the home of my paternal grandparents. With one *WhatsApp* call to his long-time friend, my father had not only spoken to Jarrah himself, but secured me an interview at Jarrah’s home in Beirut. Importantly, when I went to meet the Minister, he told me how much he respected my father and his reputation as the principal in El Marj. The meeting concluded with Jarrah asking me if there was anything else he could do to help me. I asked him for another *wasta* to connect me with Ghattas Khoury, the Lebanese Minister of Culture. Minister Jarrah picked his mobile phone off the coffee table and called Minister Khoury. He explained that a ‘daughter from his town’ was studying ‘women and the

media for her PhD’ and wanted to speak to him. Minister Khoury agreed and a meeting was set at the Ministry’s office in Beirut for the following week.

While I have limited my discussion here to these two examples, many of my fieldwork interviews were secured through these informal networks of kin, sect, and friendship. Had my ‘local’ resources been different or had my family belonged to a different religious sect, it is likely that the interviews that came to inform the work presented here would have been different. Moreover, that these interviews – and a number of my others – were secured for me by a man in my family is also telling. I was not granted the access to conduct these interviews through any direct action of my own (for the most part). As an extension of my father and my uncle, I attached myself to their connections, credibility, and their socio-economic positionality in Lebanon. Without my uncle’s connection to the military or my father’s (former) positioning as a university student/educator in Lebanon, I could not have gotten the access that I did.

In terms of my female participants, moreover, I also recognize that we shared a similar social economic background. Independent of age differences and our shared gender, most were middle class, university educated, and positioned themselves somewhere left of the political centre. To this end, finding common ground and establishing a sense of trust was made easier than it – occasionally – was with my (elite) male participants who were each members of the Lebanese upper class.

This reflection on the impact of my social and economic class, I believe, has two benefits. First, it further evidences my embeddedness (or ‘insider’ status) within the complex society I have chosen to study. Through my family connections, I was able to mobilize ‘local’ resources (*wastas*) to secure interviews. Second, it also works to highlight the interconnections between

various facets of identity. It was the intersections between social positioning, economic status, and gender that cooperated to make portions of my research possible.

iv. *Narcissism Masked as Methodology?*

Reflexivity, however, is not without its critics. Indeed, some scholars view the heightened concern for positionality – that has ‘sprouted like mushrooms’ – as the self-indulgent practice of academics obsessed with the erotics of their own language wars (Patai 1994, 64-71). Patai continues: “People who stay up nights worrying about representation should consider what would happen if all the sewers in their city were stopped, or if the garbage collection ceased for three weeks” (65). Haggerty (2003, 159) also warns that reflexivity presumes researchers are “capable of a remarkable capacity for self-awareness.” He goes on to argue that “greater reflexivity can manifest [...] as a license to write about our most beloved topic – ourselves” (159). Finlay (2002, 226) issues a similar warning: “Dangers of *infinite regress*, with researchers getting lost in endless narcissistic personal emoting or interminable deconstructions of deconstructions where all meaning gets lost, remain an ever-present threat.” Despite these challenges, she still (227) encourages us to forge on: “For all the difficulties inherent in the task, to avoid reflexive analysis altogether is likely to compromise the research.”

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological frameworks and tools used to undertake the research of this dissertation. This thesis relies on the data collected through twenty different semi-structured interviews conducted in Beirut and throughout the Beqaa Valley during the summer of 2017. I also explain how gaps in this data were supplemented and filled in with information collected through a number of online resources, including blogs, *YouTube* videos,

Instagram and *Twitter* posts, etc. These online spaces, I argue, also serve as sites where celebrities work construct their public identities as they interact with fans and other individuals. In using these sources, however, I also seek to critically engage with them, highlighting how pop music celebrities perform, construct, and connect themselves to various cultural discourses around gender and sexuality. Lastly, I concluded the chapter with a discussion of reflexivity and its uses within qualitative research. Reflexivity encourages us to not only remain mindful of how we position ourselves within the social worlds we choose to study, but also of how our participants work to position us. While thinking this way has allowed me to answer practical questions about my Lebanese heritage and its impact on my work, it also demonstrated the complicated and intersectional nature of identity. In the next chapter, as my reader will learn, I explore the concept of ‘culture’ in greater detail. I also build on the methodological observations made here and explore the theoretical approach/insights offered to us through intersectionality.

There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.

– Audre Lord,
American writer and activist

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

“It’s against my culture.”

As children, my brother and I were taught to repeat that sentence with a quickness that made it feel more instinctive than conditioned. It became our response when asked why we ate homemade lunches on hotdog day in elementary school. It was how we declined pepperoni pizza at playdates and birthday parties. It also explained why we did not join our peers in the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer while facing the large wooden crucifixes mounted in our classrooms. And it was the reason we did not stand in line with our classmates to receive the Eucharist during our school’s weekly mass.

Reflecting back on these moments, I recall how our somewhat peculiar deployment of the term ‘culture’ sometimes failed to shield us from the mockery of young peers and, at times, even aroused the suspicion of our teachers. These memories, however, now seem secondary to my realization that my parents chose to teach us that our ‘culture’ and our ‘religion’ were one and the same. Though I have never asked why they chose to teach us that those terms were synonymous, I suspect it was a conscious decision on their part. While it would have not only been unreasonable to expect children to understand and explain the nuances of Islamic dietary practices, my mother and father likely wanted to spare their Muslim children the pains of having to justify their presence in a Catholic school to other children and teachers.

Nonetheless, my parents’ endeavors to teach us to avoid consuming pork products and to withhold our participation in Christian rituals leads to a more complex understanding of culture.

My parents understood that culture was not only the ‘things’ we consumed (books, artwork, television programs, etc.), but also the practices through which we sought to understand the world around us (Hall 1997, 2). Culture became a lens through which we were taught to view our surroundings, to make sense of them and, eventually, communicate our thoughts and feelings to others who also share our lens. Thus, for my Catholic peers, the consumption of a wafer and a small sip of red wine was a physical expression – a symbol – of their shared interpretation of the world; the Eucharist meant something important to them. But that those acts did not fit into our Islamic worldview (or Islam’s ritualistic requirements) is demonstrative of a cultural difference; the lenses we used to interpret the world were different. It was, in other words, “against my culture.”

Taking inspiration from these childhood reflections, this chapter will endeavour to address a number of theoretical concerns relevant to the work presented in this dissertation. First, this chapter begins with a discussion of ‘culture’ in an effort to better understand the social terrain this thesis intends to explore in greater detail. Second, this chapter seeks to draw connections to the previous chapter (on methodology) by exploring the insights of feminist scholars working within the framework of intersectionality. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates the utility of the framework for studying women in the Middle East.

The Highs and Lows of Culture

Culture, it turns out, means different things to different people. Multiple meanings, therefore, make it a somewhat slippery term for social theorists. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1983, 87), for example, argues, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” Echoing Williams’ sentiments nearly two decades later, anthropologist M.L. Apte (1994, 2001) observed: “Despite a century of efforts to define culture

adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature.”

The treachery of these intellectual waters is only heightened when social theorists seek to make distinctions between forms of high (i.e., elite) and low (i.e., popular/mass) culture. High culture is presented as the culture of any society’s ruling classes and its social, intellectual, and financial elites. It represents sophisticated and refined tastes; it is “the best that has been thought and written in the world” (Williams 1974). High culture is also often presented as the culture whose future is jeopardized by the tastes of the unruly mobs, the lower classes. To be sure, the imagery of this threat is grim: it is the image of the Homer of Greek antiquity tossed into the dustbins of history by America’s *Homer Simpson*; of Umm Kulthum’s voice drowned out by Myriam Klink on loudspeaker; and of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* being destroyed by Miley Cyrus’ *Wrecking Ball*. But in painting these images we are also crafting an understanding that reduces popular culture to something residual. Popular (mass/low) culture, it is said, “is the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture” (Storey 2009, 6). It constitutes the left-over practices and texts that fail to measure up to the standards of high culture. Its residual-ness is what makes it the inferior culture.

This hierarchical thinking also rests on a quantitative line of argumentation. Low culture, it is argued, is often mass-produced and mass-consumed – i.e., listened to, bought, enjoyed, experienced, etc. by many people (Hall 1998, 446). This quantitative quality (i.e., that much of it exists) is also the feature that deprives low culture of complexity and richness. Only a ‘fleeting sociological inspection’ is necessary to ‘unlock what little it has to offer’ (Storey 2009, 6). In contrast, the products of high culture are seen as stemming from individual acts of human

creation. And it is this intellectual depth that demands both moral and aesthetic responses. The point here, I believe, is best demonstrated with an example.

Take the popular screen-printed red/blue image of Barack Obama above the word ‘HOPE,’ popular during the 2008 American presidential campaign. The image came to grace t-shirts, coffee mugs, the walls of college dorm rooms, and prints could be purchased on street corners across America. The image was even manipulated and used poke fun at other celebrities – it became, in other words, the stuff internet *memes* are made of (Barton 2008). But what happens to Obama’s picture when we place it beside da Vinci’s masterpiece, the *Vitruvian Man*? Not only is there only *one original* copy of the image in existence (i.e., da Vinci did not mass-produce the image), but the image itself is a complex pictorial representation of the mathematical proportions of an ideal male body. It demonstrates not only da Vinci’s unique artistic skills, but also his unique intellectual capacities (i.e., he calculated the ratios and proportions of the male body).

Continuing with the discussion of the quantitative argument above, we can begin to see how the Obama image – as a mass-produced, mass-consumed commercial item becomes a recent example of low culture, while da Vinci’s renowned work becomes the physical embodiment of human brilliance, creativity, and talent. It is an example of high culture. Those wishing to distinguish between high and low culture also generally insist that this distinction is rigid and absolutely clear (Storey 2009, 6). Yet, there are several problems with this level of certainty and the distinction between high and low culture is not so clear-cut.

First, what constitutes the *stuff* of high culture and low culture is primarily a historical question. The works of William Shakespeare have long constituted the epitome of British/English literary high culture, for example. But as cultural historian Lawrence Levine

(1988, 21 [emphasis in original]) observes: “Shakespeare *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth century America. The theatre in the first half of the nineteenth century played the role that movies played in the first half of the twentieth: it was a kaleidoscopic institution presenting a widely varying bill of fare to all classes and socioeconomic groups.” Levine’s insights demonstrate how in one era a particular cultural output (Shakespeare’s literature) can constitute ‘the best that has ever been thought and written,’ but in another serve as mass entertainment. Relatedly, no cultural output can be assigned to the category of low or high culture without reference to its *use*. Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9*, for example, can be an uplifting – even transcendental – piece of music, expressing humanity’s reverence for the divinity of God, but can also be used in a television commercial advertising something as mundane as a roast beef sandwich. Finally, maintaining the rigid binary between high and low/popular/mass culture assumes that there is no overlap between them. Or, put differently, it assumes that the elites and the masses have no common pursuits or tastes (Parker 2011, 151-2). But as Williams (1974) observes: “[E]very available version of high culture [...] includes (whether these are noticed or not) elements of the popular culture [...] of its own society.” Overlap exists between categories, making the distinction blurry and unclear. Let me demonstrate with another example: *McDonald’s* American-style cheeseburgers and exquisite French cuisine share nothing in common. But pizza can be both mass-produced (think: *McCain’s* cardboard-like frozen pizzas) or artisanal (prepared with care in a small Tuscan bistro). But either way: everyone – rich or poor, elite or commoners – enjoys pizza.

Williams’ insights regarding the overlap between high and low culture also shed light on music in the Arab world. My reader, for example, will recall from our (brief) discussion of Umm Kulthum that she was, as Davidson (1997) notes, the ‘Voice of Egypt.’ Her powerful voice and

larger-than-life persona have transformed her into something akin to the matriarch of Arab music. Indeed, her voice was so powerful that it could not only break glass, but that microphones needed to be kept half a meter from her mouth (Hammond 2007, 166). She attracted the best players, lyricists, and song writers in the Arab world who cooperated to “put her at the pinnacle of Arab high culture.” But this was not the only space she occupied in Arab culture. Millions of people in Egypt and around the Arab world tuned in to listen to her concerts, often broadcast over the far-reaching Egyptian state-owned radio stations. She was also Arab popular culture because everyone listened to her – wealthy and poor alike. Listening to her performances became a social activity, shared with family and friends. “Many who could well afford tickets preferred sitting with friends and family in coffeehouses and homes. Part of listening to Umm Kulthum was a long evening of tea and comradeship” (Davidson 1997, 1). Umm Kulthum, therefore, is a case that blurs the distinction between high and low culture or between the culture of the elites and that of the commoners.

But Umm Kulthum is not the only Arab singer to occupy space in both mass and high culture simultaneously. Lebanon, too, has produced its own legendary songstress: Fairouz. Since first stepping on the Lebanese musical scene in the early 1950s, Fairouz has not only become an important figure in Lebanese high culture,²⁶ but her songs about rural, folk life in Mount Lebanon have highlighted a sense of Lebanese particularism in Arab music – owing (at least partly) to her Greek Orthodox Christian faith (Hammond 2007, 169). Her passionate songs about Palestinians and Jerusalem, combined with her cooperation with Nasser’s Arab Nationalist government in Egypt (Stone 2008, 139), worked to ‘internationalize’ her celebrity status,

²⁶ The important space occupied by Fairouz in the collective Lebanese imagination is difficult to overstate. During his recent trip to Lebanon, French President Macron awarded the legendary songstress the Legion of Honour, the highest award in France. He later told media that she represented a sense of ‘nostalgia’ for a Lebanon that ‘many are expectant of’ (quoted in Chulov 2020).

transforming her into something larger than a Christian singer from Lebanon. Fairouz became an Arab nationalist icon. Her popularity at home in Lebanon, however, is truly beyond measure. Fairouz and her voice have served to unify a people whose history has long been marked by divisions. In fact, she has been described as one of Lebanon's few "unifying forces" and even as the embodiment of the (Lebanese) nation (i.e., her popularity in Lebanon has managed to transcend the sectarianism that has often divided the Lebanese people because Christians and Muslims of all classes all enjoy Fairouz's music). Thus, much like Umm Kulthum in Egypt (and the Arab world), Fairouz, too, occupies a peculiar cultural space that blurs the distinction between high and low forms of culture.

It seems then that in seeking to define, distinguish, label, or demarcate the boundaries of 'culture,' one will quickly find themselves trapped in a pool of academic quicksand, sinking deeper with every panicked pen stroke. Realizing this, scholars have sought to avoid this definitional trap, characterizing attempts to craft definitions as a 'waste of time' (Strinati 2004, xiv). Others, too, begin their academic works on 'culture' by noting that while they intend to talk about the 'everyday terrain of people,' they remain unsure about who 'the people' even are (Freccero 1999, 13). Given this uncertainty and academic fuzziness, it would, perhaps, be more productive to shift our discussion to a related concept that was mentioned in the introduction of chapter but – as of yet – remains undiscussed.

Does This Mean What I think It Does?

Debating whether or not this object or that event constitute high or low culture or what 'culture' actually is, I maintain, misses the larger, more significant sociological point: no object, no event, no person, no practice, or any of the *things* we typically attach to 'culture' actually *mean* anything unless we – as human beings – decide they do. "It is by our use of things, and

what we say, think, and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning” (Hall 1997, 3). Things rarely mean anything on their own. Recall my childhood story in the introduction to this chapter. Having been brought up Muslim, a small wafer was to me – in itself – nothing more than a combination of white flour, yeast, water, and salt. But for my Roman Catholic classmates, that small wafer was something profound. It was a material *symbol* of the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The wafer meant something to them because they decided that it did.

Human beings, in short, live in a “meaningful world, a world in which they respond to, and are shaped by, the meanings which have been linked to their social and material realities” (Grossberg 1992, 43). This insight, however, begs the question of ‘*where/how* meaning is produced?’ Put differently, this is like asking: ‘What social processes took place (or did not take place) to transform a small wafer into something important, beyond being a mixture of flour and yeast? Stuart Hall (1997, 3-4) writes:

Meaning is produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural ‘things’; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value or significance. Or when we weave narratives, stories – and fantasies – around them.

Following Hall, we can begin to see how the small wafer – being part and parcel of Christian theology regarding Christ’s Last Supper before the Crucifixion – came to mean something important. The wafer, in short, was woven in/around the Christian narrative of the last hours of Christ’s life on Earth.

Meanings, therefore, are important. They serve to help regulate our behavior. They help us set rules, norms, and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. And they are at play in every personal and social interaction in which we take part (Hall 1997, 3-4). This focus

on shared meanings runs the risk of making these processes seem very fixed or too unitary. In fact, there is a great deal of diversity regarding any meaning and there are always numerous ways of thinking about, interpreting, and representing it. Our relations to music, further, offer an excellent example of this diversity.

For many of us, music occupies a very important space in our affective lives. We come to develop ‘relationships’ to certain songs or artists and, in doing so, assign them meanings (DeNora 2000, 64). Music comes to fit into our personal narratives about important moments in our lives or even the people we have loved or lost. Samira Said and Cheb Mami’s *Youm Wara Youm*, for example, will always remind me of my childhood because I fondly remember dancing (awkwardly) to the song in my parents’ living room. My father, despite having lived in Canada for decades, still describes a feeling of pride and nostalgia upon hearing the Lebanese national anthem. Others will joyfully recall the song they danced to at their weddings, while others will hear a lost love one’s favorite song and think back on happier times. What is significant in each example is that music finds itself woven in and around our personal histories. Expressing ourselves in and through music, by tying it into our daily lives, we give and create meanings. These meanings, moreover, are diverse and unique to our individual histories and narratives. Further, as we pause and reflect on what a particular song means to us, we each engage in a sort of mental ‘stock taking’ of who we are and where we have been (DeNora 2000, 64-5). To this end, we are able to transform ourselves into objects of self-knowledge. It becomes, in other words, a form of self-discovery.

A key point, I think, is that meanings are not fixed. The sense of childhood happiness that *Youm Wara Youm* has come to symbolize for me is uniquely mine, for example. For this reason,

there is never a single correct answer to questions about something's meaning. Meanings are always being negotiated, debated, updated, and even fiercely fought over.

Indeed, it is these debates and negotiations that are of interest to me here. Popular music, I argue, is a site where meanings are being contested. Pop stars themselves, as we will see, often push the boundaries of and question a variety of social meanings, including the meanings attached to the female body (and how it should be covered or uncovered); the meanings of appropriate governance and what a government should or should not do for (or to) its populace; the meanings attached to various forms of intimate human relationships (homosexuality versus heterosexuality); and even the meanings attached to the institution of marriage.

To this end, pop music participates in the debates that transform culture – whatever it may be or contain – into a battleground; a constant site of struggle, where humans are capable of acting out ‘complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation’ (Hall 1998, 447). It does not, in other words, act upon us as if we were ‘blank slates.’ Recognizing this is also to say that human beings are capable of reason, choice, and have nuanced understandings of the peculiarities of the social worlds they inhabit. It is for this reason that scholars concede that drawing a direct causal line from ‘Cultural Event A’ to ‘Political Response B’ is difficult, if not impossible. Stuart Hall (2018 [1992], 81) acknowledged this ambiguity when he noted, “there is something about culture [...] which always escapes and evades the attempt to link it directly and immediately with other structures.” Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 20), too, notes: “Understanding the articulation between culture and politics is a project that is always just beyond our reach.” If we are to take the insights of theorists like Grossberg and Hall seriously, we must also acknowledge the complexity of human beings, the social organizations they create, and the variation of their experiences within them. Recognition of this complexity, moreover, prohibits

us from using ‘culture’ or any other blanket term as an explanation for why societies thrive or collapse, or – simply – why things do or do not happen.

Intersectionality...

In her discourse-shattering article, “Under Western Eyes,” post-colonial scholar Chandra Mohanty (1984) takes (what she calls) ‘white Western feminist’ scholarship to task. ‘White Western feminist’ scholarship, in her reading, is both of limited analytic utility and complicit in reproducing very specific relations of power. She notes that the limitations of this sort of feminism are made “evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently *all* women are expected to organize” (1984, 62 [emphasis in original]). More specifically, Mohanty problematizes the presumption in this strain of feminist scholarship that views women – across classes and cultures – as somehow socially constituting a homogenous group. “The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. [...]. What binds women together, therefore, is this sociological notion of the ‘universality’ of their oppression.” This assumption, moreover, is subsequently defended and evidenced within the knowledge outputs of Western feminists (1984, 65). These knowledge outputs – ethnographies, diaries, travel accounts, etc. – also work to discursively construct ‘third world women’ in direct opposition to their Western counterparts. Women of the third world were victimized, impoverished, and uneducated, while Western women were educated, modern, and free to choose for themselves. Put differently, women of the third world and women in the West may be united under some fictitious banner of ‘oppression,’ but only one group was imagined as being in possession of the power necessary to do anything about it (Salem 2013).

But this is not where the problems stop. Mohanty recognizes that no scholarship can be value neutral or apolitical. In fact, she argues that this sort of problematic writing and thinking on ‘third world women’ is tantamount to discursive colonization by positioning Western feminists alone as the central ‘subjects.’ “Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their ‘object’ status” (1984, 79). Consequently, this lack of self-awareness, compounded by a general lack of reflexivity, has worked to reproduce forms of imperialism in Western feminist writings on women in non-Western locales and – importantly – on non-white/minority women within the West itself.

Significantly, Black feminist scholars and activists in the United States (and elsewhere) have been among the first to articulate their skepticism and criticisms of ‘feminism.’ They have not only taken issue with the supposed universality of the category of ‘woman,’ but sought to show feminism – as a political project – was highly exclusionary. Black women have also worked to demonstrate how their everyday experiences were shaped by their gender, but by their class, race, geography, education, etc. Indeed, in her 1981 book, *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks (121) explains – at length and with stirring detail – how mainstream American feminism was experienced as exclusionary and racist by Black women:

The group of college-educated white middle and upper class women who came together to organize a women’s movement [...] demanded a transformation of society, a revolution, a change in the American social structure. Yet [...] they revealed that they had not [...] undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others. Consequently, the Sisterhood they talked about has not become a reality [...]. Instead, the hierarchical pattern of race and sex relationships already established in American society merely took a different form under “feminism” [...].

The insights of Black scholars and activists, including Marxist activist Claudia Jones in the 1960s and 1970s, have demonstrated that one’s reality is a product of a complicated web of

different facets of their identities. From this insight emerged the notion of ‘triple oppression,’ as a means to creating more accurate descriptions the discrimination and oppression experienced by Black women (Lynn 2014, 7). That is, Black women described experiencing discrimination on three separate (but related) fronts: gender, class, and race (Yuval-Davis 2006, 195). Scholars found the ‘triple oppression’ notion to be so analytically useful that “race-class-gender” became the “holy triad of feminist studies” (Salem 2013). This sort of feminist and social science work was also to dismantle the fiction of the “universal woman,” allowing scholars to re-center “woman” as a political notion attached to different experiences and subjectivities (Salem 2013; see also Brah and Pheonix 2004; McCall 2005, 1777).

Importantly, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, legal scholars – working within the critical race studies movement – had also committed themselves to problematizing the law’s purported colour-blindness, neutrality, and objectivity (Nash 2008, 2). Black American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw turned to caselaw to explore how Black women in the United States were “multiply-burdened” by race and gender simultaneously (1989, 140). Citing a case where a group of Black women had unsuccessfully sought to sue General Motors for racial/gender discrimination (i.e., discrimination against them as “Black women”), Crenshaw argues that contemporary legal approaches assume a detachment between one’s race and one’s gender. This assumed separation (what she calls ‘single-axis analysis’ or what Spelman [1988, 136] calls ‘tootsie roll metaphysics’) renders the courts incapable of properly addressing the number of ways Black women can experience discrimination as “Black women” (1989, 149). To clarify her point to her reader, Crenshaw uses the analogy of a busy, traffic-filled intersection:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a

Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.

The term ‘intersectionality’ emerged from her analogy and served as an incredibly useful ‘catch-all’ term for feminist activists and scholars already engaged in the sort of work Crenshaw described (Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik 2011, 2; Nash 2008, 3; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187; Spelman 1988). Importantly, while Crenshaw’s earlier work focused specifically on the intersections between race and gender, she is careful to nuance her insights in later work. Using the case of violence against (Black) women, she explains:

[I]ntersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity. Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class and sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (1991, 1244-5).

Crenshaw’s point is significant. She not only recognizes the inherent complexity of identity, but also seeks to “anchor the formation of subjectivities and agency within a nexus of social relations and structures (of race, class, gender, etc.) that work together to (re)produce power and privilege” (Bilge 2010, 23). Intersectionality, therefore, falls within the epistemological boundaries of post-modernism and post-structuralism (Salem 2013). Indeed, intersectionality and post-structuralism both understand knowledge production as being complicit in power relations, as well as how people construct knowledge from varying social locations, such as their race, gender, class, and geographic location (Mann 2013, 60). Similarly, post-modernism problematizes the assumption of value neutrality and objectivity in social research and analysis, encouraging authors and researchers to “recognize the reflexive nature of knowledge.” This reflexivity demands that authors “acknowledge how their social locations influence their

knowledge claims and be accountable for how their knowledge claims may influence other people” (Mann 2013, 60).

To many scholars reading the above summary, these insights may seem commonplace or obvious. “Of course,” they may say, “researchers should identify their positionality in their work! Researchers participate in the social worlds they study!” Others may say: “A study that relies on gender as the sole explanatory variable to account for the unique experiences of women is bound to be problematic!” Comments and feelings like these not only suggest the ‘widespread’ adoption of the insights of intersectionality amongst (feminist) scholars, but also lend support for those who have referred to this focus on difference, the deconstruction of knowledge, and decentering of the category of ‘woman’ as constituting a “paradigm shift” in feminist thought (see Barrett 1992, 205-6).

This popularity, while inspiring researchers to produce more context-conscious and reflexive research, has made it more difficult to formulate a single, uniform answer to the question of ‘what is intersectionality?’ Indeed, different scholars use the term in different ways, sometimes even with inconsistencies and ambiguity (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 188). Acknowledging this challenge, Collins and Bilge (2020, 14) in their appropriately titled book, “Intersectionality,” offer readers a broad definition of intersectionality that they feel most would accept:

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences.

Their definition is useful as it neatly summarizes the key insight of intersectionality: in any society or social location, the inequalities and relations of power at work within our race, class, sexual, etc. identities do not function independently of one another. Rather, they operate in tandem, meaning they are experienced simultaneously. While these inequalities of power may often go unnoticed or be dismissed as ‘natural,’ they impact nearly every aspect of our social world as human beings.

...and its Critics

While intersectionality has led to ground-breaking changes within feminist theory, critics have pointed out a number of weaknesses, confusions, and issues. Perhaps most famously, gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, 143) has taken issue with the ‘etc.’ that is often found at the lists of social categories. She notes:

The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed ‘etc.’ at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete. This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated ‘etc.’ that so often occurs at the end of such lines? This is a sign of exhaustion as well as of the illimitable process of signification itself.

Scholars have responded to Butler by questioning the premise of her argument. Yuval-Davis (2006, 203), for example, asks if the process of signification is really ‘illimitable,’ noting that “in specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions that are more important than others in constructing certain positionings.”

Another critique that has been levelled against intersectionality concerns its seemingly unproblematic use of categories to describe people. It appears to view human beings (and the social world they inhabit) as being made up of various categories that, when studied through the

theoretical lens of intersectionality, magically expose the human being in question, making them knowable to others (Salem 2013). Taking this observation seriously, Crenshaw herself has sought to reply to her critics. She has argued that the use of categories or labels can, at times, work to empower those who deploy them – as was the case with critical race legal scholars who needed to use the discourse (of categories) of the law (‘race’ and ‘gender,’ for example) to highlight its ineffectiveness (Crenshaw 2011, 226). She goes on to observe that the social constructedness of categories (like ‘race’ or ‘gender’ or ‘class’) does not “defeat or render incoherent” projects that seek to address the very real effects of these categories on our lives as human beings (226).

Intersectionality, Gender, and the Middle East

When the sort of (Western) feminist scholarship that Mohanty has imagined Arab and Muslim women, it has – very often – reduced them to ‘object status.’ They are – collectively, across time and space – victims of a ‘stable, ahistorical something’ that works to oppress them (1984, 63). The source of this victimization was easy enough to identify. It was Islam. “...Islam [came] to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, [and] hordes of hated barbarians” (Said 1979, 59). But not just Islam. More specifically, it was “[t]he peculiar practices of Islam with respect to Women” (Ahmed 1992, 149). The most visible of these ‘peculiar practices’ was veiling. Veiling was often singled out as a central symbol of Islam’s poor treatment of women and, as such, the practice became “open target of colonial attack” (Ahmed 1992, 152). Frantz Fanon (1965, 38), too, argued that the colonial project wove an understanding of women as ‘inert, demonetized, and dehumanized objects’ through the *imposition* of veiling by Arab men. Similarly, Spivak (1994, 94; emphasis in original) notes: “Imperialism’s image as the establisher

of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind.”

In the white Western feminist imaginary, the oppression experienced by Arab and Muslim women may have worked to bring them into the fold of ‘universal womanhood,’ but their object status (combined with the ruthless, unrelenting patriarchy of Islam) meant that they were forever destined to remain victimized, impoverished, and uneducated (see Mahmood 2005, 7). This is, of course, untrue and has been taken to task many times by feminist scholars of the Arab Middle East. They have sought to problematize the idea of the ‘universal woman’ and, in doing so, emphasize the diversity of experience amongst Arab women – across religious, geographic, class, and even historic lines. While similarities in experience exist, distinctions must be made in the details. In this way, scholars have sought to be “attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (Mohanty 2003, 501).

Indeed, feminist historians of the Middle East have demonstrated how Middle Eastern and Arab women themselves have actually long taken issue with the concept of ‘global sisterhood,’ pointing out its internal contradictions and power inequalities. Historian Margot Badran (1995, 71-3), for example, has shown how early twentieth century (middle- and upper-class) Egyptian feminist activists and writers – at once – maintained affable and antagonistic relationships with British feminists. British feminists, she argues, sought to ‘uplift’ their third-world sisters (in Egypt, India, and elsewhere), reserving for themselves a ‘mentoring role.’ They spoke of ‘equality’ and ‘sisterhood,’ but were largely uninterested in addressing the contradictions involved in Britain’s continued political, economic, and cultural colonization and exploitation of Egypt and its people. Egyptian feminists, on the other hand, were interested in

experimenting with political innovations and new ideas that took inspiration from Britain and Europe but sought to preserve the uniquely Egyptian dimensions of their feminism. Badran summarizes the situation: “Gender brought women together, but only to a point” (Badran 1995, 72).

Badran’s insights are significant. She carefully positions her analysis of Egyptian feminist activism against the backdrop of the power inequalities at work in the colonial context, demonstrating an important intersection between colonialism and gender. She demonstrates, in other words, how much context matters when trying to paint a more representative portrait of the sort of activism and agency demonstrated by Egyptian women. This insight is summed up nicely by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1998, 5): “Women in the Middle East must be studied [...] through the differing political projects of nation states, with their distinct histories, relationships to colonialism and the West, class politics, ideological uses of Islamic idiom, and struggles over the role of Islamic law in state and legal apparatuses.” Sarah Graham-Brown (2001, 24) has also observed: “The extent and impact of economic, social, and legal changes [on Middle Eastern women] vary greatly according to social class, geographic location, and ethnic or national group.” Feminist scholars of the Middle East, therefore, have been mindful to nuance their analyses of women in the region.

In seeking to nuance their analyses, moreover, they have also devoted to significant attention to issues of economic class, recognizing that a woman’s class positioning can impact her life experiences, including the sort of activism she may (or may not) choose to engage in. Joseph (2001, 38), for example, argues, “Middle- or upper-class women may be less likely than working class women to act politically in the street, neighbourhood or square. They may, on the other hand, be more likely to act through formal organizations: political parties, women’s

associations, philanthropic organizations, religious institutions, social agencies, and the like.” Her observations have been confirmed by Badran’s careful analysis of Egyptian feminism (mentioned above). Badran explains how class impacted Egyptian women’s interactions with the ‘cult of domesticity,’ i.e., idealized notions of a woman’s domestic responsibilities (including heightened knowledge of hygiene, childcare practices, women’s health, etc.). Women’s publications and journals, for example, specifically targeted middle-class women, while upper-class women – who had access to domestic help and more ‘free time’ – participated through their charitable dispensaries that sought to offer this information/assistance to lower-class women (1995, 63). Though historical records (publications, for example) of middle-class and upper-class women’s activities remain, Baron (2005, 3) laments that it is often the experiences and memories of lower-class and peasant women that are forgotten or excluded from ‘official’ tellings of national histories, despite the fact that it is their image that has very often come to symbolize the humble (and gendered) origins of the nation. Abu-Lughod (1990) has also sought to bring attention to the complex intersections between women on the ‘outside’ of society and macro-level structures in her work with Bedouin communities in Egypt. She observed, for example, how some young women rejected their arranged suitors. They rejected them not because the marriages were arranged, but because they perceived the suitors to be incapable of purchasing them the material goods associated with middle-class Egyptian life – washing machines, home furnishings, clothing, etc. Their desires for these sorts of material goods, she continues, worked to ‘increasingly enmesh them in new sets of power relations,’ not only with the men who could afford to buy these things for them, but with global consumerism, the Egyptian economy, and the global economy by extension (1990, 50-2).

Scholars of the Middle East, too, are all well-aware of the place of religion in the region's domestic politics. In the region, a woman's positionality and experiences with the social world around her is very often seriously impacted by her religion (and her perceived religiosity by those around her). Understanding this, feminist scholars have gone to great lengths to nuance their analyses and remain conscious of these differing experiences, particularly in states that house minority religious communities/sects or exhibit forms of religious pluralism. In her analysis of early twentieth century Egyptian feminism, for example, Badran (1995, 66-9) remains mindful of the experiences of Coptic Christian women, noting that they understood their position as a minority group within a country that housed a Sunni majority population and adopted a strategy of "innovation without proclamation," often choosing to work independently and quietly within their own institutions and networks to improve their community's situation. Similarly, Lara Deeb (2006) complicates the identity of pious Shia (women) associated with (predominantly Shia) charitable associations (known as *jam'iyyas* in Arabic) in Beirut's Southern suburb (known as al-Dahiyya). Through extensive field research, Deeb carefully positions her participants against the complicated background of Lebanese sectarianism and the country's post-war politics. She explains – with inspiring detail – how her participants' decisions to volunteer with *jam'iyyas* in al-Dahiyya locates them at intersections (what she terms 'entanglements') between humanitarianism, gender, history, politics, and Islam (2006, 191). Women, she notes, described their "love of giving" and routinely sought to compare their lives to the moral/religious standard set by *Sayyida*²⁷ Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Islamic Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).²⁸ Significantly, Deeb also explores the "embeddedness" of her

²⁷ *Sayyida* is the feminine of the honorific, *Sayyid*, used by Muslims when mentioning those in the Prophet's bloodline.

²⁸ PBUH – Peace Be Upon Him – is an honorific used by Muslims after the mention of the name of Prophet (in writing or verbal speech).

participants. Rather than understanding themselves as individuals, many of the women Deeb spoke with understood themselves as being embedded in complex networks of social relationships, particularly focused around notions of kinship (2006, 209).

The importance of kinship ties (true or fictive)²⁹ across the Middle East would be difficult to overstate. (Indeed, this importance explains why I will dwell on kinship for some time throughout this work, especially in chapter three.) Understanding this, feminist scholars of the Arab world have been very critical of Western feminist approaches that have tended to focus either on the nuclear family or marital relations (husbands and wives). The consequence of this oversight, they argue, has been a lack of theorizing on the impact of extended kinship relationships (cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and siblings) which are integral for understanding the lived experiences of both men and women in Middle East (Joseph 2000, 115). By exploring the ‘centrality of the family in the Arab world,’ scholars have sought to better understand the complicated relational matrices through which gendered (and other) identities are constructed and experienced (Joseph 1999a, 8; see also Joseph 2004). In doing so, moreover, these scholars have simultaneously contested Western liberal notions of individualism that have often characterized assumptions about what constitutes ‘the self’ or ‘a person’ (Joseph 1999a, 17; see also Deeb 2006; Joseph 2000; Kandiyoti 2001; 1988). Writing of her experiences in Lebanon following the passing of her father, Joseph (1999b), for example, characterizes Lebanese culture as one that “embeds people in familial relationships.” Personhood is not understood as a single, detached, and self-interested individual. “Personhood is understood in terms of our relationships

²⁹ My brothers and I often joke that “everyone we meet is either our uncle, our aunt, or our cousin.” We do this as a subtle way of pointing out the importance of fictive kinship ties amongst the Lebanese. Often used as terms of respect, (elder) men and women are referred to using these (fictive) kinship titles. In other settings, especially in contexts marked by religion, it is also common to hear the use of ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’ Deeb (2006), too, makes this observation in her work with Shia Islamic charitable organizations.

woven into one's sense of self, identity, and place in the world." An individual is "never without family, without relationships, outside the social body" (1999b, 54). These kinship ties, moreover, have often been intertwined with patriarchy in ways that work to legitimize the gendered domination of males (as we will see in greater detail in the coming chapter).

In this section, I explored the work of feminist scholars focused on the Middle East and Arab women. Taken together, their work further problematizes conceptions of 'universalism' amongst the world's women or the notion of 'global sisterhood.' While certain similarities in experience may exist, they have demonstrated that women's positionalities relative to and experiences with forms of power – be it from the state, colonial authorities, or even national and global economies – vary tremendously across time, class, geography, religion, etc. Our responsibility as researchers, therefore, is to remain mindful of these positionalities.

Revisiting Reflexivity

In this final section, I endeavour to connect the insights of intersectionality to my project's methodology more explicitly. I seek to (very briefly) explore the complementary relationship that exists between intersectionality and researcher reflexivity.

As noted earlier, but perhaps most explicitly – in the preface – this project is part and parcel of a larger internal project whereby I endeavour to better understand facets of my own identity. On a relatively superficial level, of course, I understand that my heritage impacted my choice of project. To this end, I am not unique. Many others, I am sure, study phenomena that are significant to them in some deeply personal way. Reflecting on one's direct involvement in and impact on their research at every stage, I have learned, is a far more challenging undertaking.

Stemming from post-modern and post-structural concerns over the (im)possibility of producing value-neutral research and research's complicity in reproducing (unequal) power

relations, intersectionality – as a theory – complements the sort of research reflexivity discussed at length in the previous chapter. Intersectionality recognizes that the formation of subjectivities takes place within a matrix of social relations and structures (including race, class, gender, etc.). Each of these, moreover, cooperates to reproduce numerous power relations and even power inequalities. Our experiences, identities, and relationships with power, in sum, are not merely products of ‘gender’ or ‘race’ or ‘sexuality’ individually. Rather, each facet or category of our identities must be understood as working together to shape our experiences.

In recognizing the complicated identities and experiences of our research participants, be they Black women in the United States or Arab women across the Middle East, researchers must also recognize their own complicated identities and experiences – within and outside the research environment. Intersectionality reminds us that social categories ‘matter’ and through reflexivity we better able to understand ‘how’ it is that they come to matter in the fieldwork or research environment. We also become better equipped to understand how these categories come to shape the dynamics of social power that come to situate researchers and their participants. Thinking this way, I believe, allows us to begin seeing how intersectionality offers the theoretical insights that can fuel the practice of researcher reflexivity.

An example, I think, would be useful to demonstrate this point.

In the previous chapter I discussed my interviews with Sunni imams. Intersectionality helps explain how these interactions were regulated by very real forms of social power that worked to alter my personal behaviour and shaped my interactions with the imams. It was understood – by me, and (I assume) my participants – that they were not interactions between social equals, despite our sharing a religious sect. The imams were not only older and male, they commanded a significant degree of social (even political) power and respect. As a young,

unmarried female, I did not command the same degree of social power that my participants did. In these moments, gender, age, religion, and even marital status all worked simultaneously to structure our interactions. Importantly, no single category, taken independently, could fully capture or explain that dynamic.

That I felt as though I needed to wear a *hijab* and dress modestly during our interviews, I believe, also demonstrates the complicated workings of social power in those situations. Importantly, I was not compelled or instructed to wear it. My own mother, who herself wears a *hijab*, has never instructed me to wear it – in any context or circumstance. But somehow, I knew that it would be wrong not to wear one. Did I feel that way just because I am Muslim? Would I have done it if I were a Christian or belonged any other religion? Did I feel embarrassed about putting my own religious practices (or lack thereof) on display? Was I self-conscious of my age relative to these older, authority-commanding men? I have given considerable thought to these experiences.

On one hand, I recognize the more material (or practical?) benefits of wearing a *hijab* in those moments. I recognize now that it may have made my participants feel more comfortable around me. This comfort, moreover, may have made them more willing to speak honestly with me. While I make this point in the previous chapter, it did not dawn on me at the time. To have thought that way in those moments, I think, would have made my actions seem artificial or – worse – reduce the *hijab* to a costume that I could put on and take off when it suited me. The feelings that compelled me to wear it were genuine, not some kind of elaborately staged social performance designed to facilitate my fieldwork. Despite recognizing the sincerity of my feelings in those moments, I remain unable to articulate a single, coherent answer explaining why I did it. I suspect that this inability stems from the fact that in those moments I was

experiencing each facet of my identity simultaneously. My decision to veil in those moments was a manifestation of the simultaneity of experience of age, gender, religion, and social position (relative to the imams).

This brief example from my fieldwork experiences, I think, demonstrates the complementary nature of intersectionality (as a theory) and researcher reflexivity (as a practice). What took place in those moments cannot be understood with reference only to my gender, only my age, or only my religion. Rather, these experiences highlight the intersections and overlaps between gender, age, and religion. Further, through researcher reflexivity, I have come to better understand my social positioning within the community I was trying to study and the different power dynamics around which our interactions were ordered.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to address a number of theoretical concerns in greater detail. This chapter began with a discussion culture and noted how the term has proven to be somewhat slippery for social scientists. Given this slippery situation, it is, perhaps, more useful for social scientists to turn their attentions toward the concept of ‘meaning’ and explore how the meanings of various important social institutions can be debated, changed, or even fiercely fought over. Recognizing the complicated nature of meanings also entails recognizing the complicated nature of human identity and experience. Understanding this, the chapter turned its attentions towards a discussion of the concept of intersectionality. As a theoretical approach, intersectionality stresses the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when seeking to understand how the social world is constructed and experienced by different individuals. In doing so, intersectionality directly challenges long-standing and problematic assumptions about a universal, stable category of ‘women.’ These insights, further, have been affirmed by scholars who have studied the

Middle East, arguing that multiple dimensions of women's experience – history, geography, class, religion, and kinship ties – must be considered to paint a more fair portrait of their lives. The final section of this chapter sought to connect the insights of intersectionality to the discussion of reflexivity in the previous chapter, noting that the theory actually stands to complement the method. Mindful of these theoretical insights, the following chapter seeks to offer readers a more detailed discussion of the Lebanese state, its history, and, of course, women's political/social activism.

Equality is not feasible. Allah said that if there were two creators of this world, it would crumble. If you have two directors of a company, and one wants something that the other does not, it is chaos. We have to have one head. The man is the head of the family. Even men, between themselves, are not equal. [...]. Allah made us different. We're not all on the same level. If men are not equal, why would I make men and women the same?

- Judge in Sunni religious courts,
Interview with author (August 2017)

Chapter Three: Gender Activism and Social Change in Lebanon

Introduction

The Government of Canada formally warns its citizens to ‘exercise a high degree of caution’ while travelling in/to Lebanon due to its ‘unpredictable security situation’ and the ever-present risk of ‘terrorist attack.’³⁰ The pervasiveness of information like this on Lebanon, I suspect, worked to raise ‘red flags’ for Carleton’s Research Ethics Board, whose primary goal – understandably – is to keep both researchers and participants safe from harm. Indeed, before granting me the necessary approvals to conduct fieldwork, the Board suggested that I contact the Lebanese Government to confirm that I would be permitted to conduct research (safely) in the country. As an extension of the Lebanese Government, I chose to go to speak with officials at the Lebanese Embassy in Ottawa. But what was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to just barge into the embassy and begin asking questions about Lebanon’s supposed safety (or lack thereof)?

I confided in my mother. And – just as she always has throughout my life – she found a solution to my problem. “Lena,” she laughed, “we are Lebanese. Take your *Ikhraj Kayd* (birth registry) with you and go ask them whatever you want.” My mother words were important; she reminded me of who and what I was: Lebanese. Suddenly, the anxiety I felt about never having lived in Lebanon, never having gone to school in Lebanon, and even my accented (‘heavy’)

³⁰ See: <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/lebanon>. (Accessed February 13, 2021).

Arabic, all withered away because I was a Lebanese citizen and have been since the day I was born. But while it was my mother who reminded me that I belonged, my ability to claim *legal* membership (i.e., citizenship) had nothing to do with her. Rather – as we shall see in greater detail below – it was the dual result of being my father’s daughter and the institutionalization of Lebanon’s own peculiar brand of patriarchy. And so, armed with a decades-old, yellowed piece of paper and shielded by my father’s surname, I bravely entered the embassy.

Immediately upon entering the building, the official began speaking to me in Arabic – possibly because, as discussed earlier in chapter one, looks matter and my ‘look’ suggested that I could comprehend Arabic. Nonetheless, one of the first questions the official asked me was if I were Lebanese. I explained that I was and offered up my birth registry as proof. The official looked at the paper and asked me what I wanted to do. I explained that I was working on my PhD and wanted to conduct research in Lebanon. His reply mirrored my mother’s earlier comments. From his perspective, I was not a foreigner travelling to Lebanon, but a Lebanese going back to her country. On the basis of my citizenship, I was told that I could travel freely around the country and speak to whomever I wished. He also suggested that I request a Lebanese passport – as an easier means of proving my citizenship at police/military checkpoints. I agreed. And just like that, I was offered another document that not only evidenced my citizenship, but also my personal connection to (or my embeddedness in) the operation of patriarchy in Lebanon. All it cost me was the time to fill out the paperwork, my thumbprint, and \$40.00 CAD. But more significantly, I was told that I belonged, but only because Omar Saleh, my Lebanese father, had decided to claim legal ‘ownership’ of me.

Taking inspiration from my experience at the Lebanese Embassy, this chapter seeks to offer my reader a more thorough understanding of the complicated (gendered) workings of

Lebanese politics, focusing specifically on women's activism and the challenges they have faced. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I begin with a historical discussion of early activism and the gendering of Lebanese citizenship. Second, I focus on post-war dynamics, and explore how sectarianism has shaped (and even limited) spaces available for gender-focused reforms. Finally, I briefly discuss the significance of social media for activism in Lebanon and explore popular music's connection to forms of social change.

Early Activism and the Gendering of Lebanese Citizenship

My mother and my aunts (biological and fictive) often joke amongst themselves, observing that 'Lebanese women do not know how to be quiet.' Having heard this sentence so frequently in my childhood, I came to assume that it explained why my mother and aunts spent so long on the telephone with one another. Years later, I now understand that this is not what they meant. Their jokes suggested that they each understood what I did not; they knew that women in Lebanon have a long history of openly questioning the functioning and operation of their surroundings. Passivity, in other words, is not a trait common to any of Lebanon's diverse women (Stephan 2012, 111-2).

Indeed, the women of modern Lebanon have long been vocal critics of their status and positioning as they demanded greater participation in the public sphere (Kingston 2013, 86). Lebanese feminism, Stephan (2014) argues, emerged in 1920s under the French Mandate amongst elite women (whom she terms *raedat* or pioneers). This early feminism, she continues, was influenced by enlightenment thinking from Europe, the various struggles against occupation and colonialism in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the earlier efforts of Egyptian women to achieve female emancipation (see also Baron 2005; Maksoud 1996, 89; Traboulsi 2003). Importantly, this early feminist activity largely concerned itself with the establishment and

running of charitable and education-focused organizations, *al-jamiyyat khayriyya*, and have actually sustained their presence in the country ever since (Stephan 2014; 2012, 115; see also Deeb 2006).

By the late 1920s, according to historian Elizabeth Thompson (2000, 97), the scope “of women’s activities steadily widened beyond charity and education.” Women, she argues, began to ‘increasingly address the state on the social issues that concerned them.’ They did this, she continues, “in the spirit of cooperation in matters of mutual concern and in a spirit of opposition and confrontation” (97). They championed issues like public health and sanitation, limits on women’s work hours and for the setting of a minimum wage, and even the need for higher tariffs on imported goods (97-8). Through these efforts, Thompson argues, women activists “began to emphasize their identity as women and their collective goal to achieve the right to full participation in the civic order” (98). By the 1930s, moreover, this early activism – despite its elitist origins – had successfully managed to emerge as a significant presence on the social and political scene (98).

The women’s activism that accompanied the era of nation-building that took place after the establishment of the First Lebanese Republic following independence from France in 1943 was marked by its focus on the attainment of full political rights (voting and to be elected) for women (Daou 2015; Stephan 2014). By 1947, according to Rita Stephan (2014), there were two primary women’s advocacy groups in Lebanon – and they were divided along sectarian lines. The first was the Lebanese Women’s Union (*Ittihad al-Nisa’ al-Loubnani*). The Union was originally founded in 1920 and its membership consisted mostly of Muslim women’s organizations and those who shared Arab Nationalist and leftist political leanings (Daou 2015; Stephan 2014). The second was the Women’s Solidarity Association (*Jam’iyat al-Tadamon al-*

Nisa’). The Association was founded in 1947 and its membership consisted of elite and bourgeois women from twenty different Christian organizations throughout Lebanon. In 1952, both camps decided that their efforts would be more fruitful if they joined forces and established a more permanent organization. From this decision, the Lebanese Council of Women³¹ (LCW) was created to serve as an umbrella organization uniting Christian and Muslim groups (Daou 2015; Stephan 2014; 2012, 116). The Council directed its energies towards the organization of a sustained and united campaign to pressure the Lebanese Government to grant all Lebanese women full voting rights. The campaign achieved its goal on February 18, 1953 when Lebanese President Camille Chamoun signed a new electoral law that granted women full suffrage and the right to hold political office (Daou 2015; Thompson 2000, 289; Stephan 2014). Importantly, activists working under or around the LCW – including activist/lawyer Laure Moghaizel, whose significant contributions to Lebanese feminism will be discussed in greater detail below – would continue to fight for women’s rights prior to the outbreak of Lebanon’s Civil War in 1975. Indeed, the Council secured a number of important victories for Lebanese women, including: the 1959 achievement of partial reforms to inheritance laws for Christian and some Muslim women³²; the 1960 elimination of the law that required Lebanese women to renounce their Lebanese citizenship upon marrying a man with a foreign citizenship; and in 1974 they successfully ended the restrictions on women’s right to travel internationally without securing the written consent of her husband (Stephan 2012, 116).

³¹ The name of the Council is sometimes translated into English as ‘Lebanese Women’s Council.’ They are, nonetheless, the same organization.

³² Sunni Muslim women, for example, were permitted to inherit equal shares with their male siblings from their late mother’s estate.

To be sure, these pre-war gains for women in Lebanon are significant and should not be downplayed or belittled in any way. As Moghaizel herself has noted of how these important rights were secured: “It was always due to tremendous efforts and persistence, in addition to the constant distribution of memoranda.”³³ However, to better understand why such ‘tremendous efforts and persistence’ were needed to reform laws and secure women’s full membership within the Lebanese state (i.e., citizenship) – including those surrounding women’s suffrage – we must first examine how it was that decisions made under the French Mandate worked to ‘gender’ the dynamics of citizenship in Lebanon that continue today (as suggested by my anecdote in the introduction to this chapter).

After assuming control over Lebanese and Syrian territory following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, French mandatory officials opted to recycle much of the pre-existing institutional foundations left by the Ottomans (Kingston 2013, 28). On the 23rd of May in 1926 – after a prolonged delay – the French finally promulgated Lebanon’s first constitution (Traboulsi 2007, 89-90; see also Kingston 2013, 28). Political scientist Paul Kingston argues that the underlying principles of the 1926 constitution were simultaneously democratic and sectarian.³⁴ He notes, for example, that the constitution was democratic to the ends that it “guaranteed personal liberties, broadened the (male)³⁵ electorate by abolishing property requirements, reduced the minimum voting age, and, after amendments in the late 1920s, enhanced the powers

³³ Taken from a 1995 interview with Moghaizel conducted by Hania Osseiran. The interview can be accessed online here: <http://www.alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ/article/view/880/876>. (Accessed February 15, 2021).

³⁴ Similarly, Traboulsi (2007, 90) characterizes the 1926 constitution as a “hybrid,” noting that “on a republican body, emphasizing individual rights and liberties and political and judicial equality were grafted articles concerning communal rights and representation [...]”

³⁵ Recall that Lebanese women secured the right to vote in 1953.

of the presidency³⁶ so that it could act in a more autonomous, non-sectarian, and unifying manner” (2013, 28). In terms of sectarianism, moreover, the constitution “maintained the Ottoman practice of proportional religious representation in the assembly, cabinet, and civil service; safeguarded the independence of communal educational institutions³⁷; and *guaranteed the autonomy of each community in matters of personal status law*³⁸ [...]” (2013, 28; emphasis added).

The consequences of these decisions (vis-à-vis personal status) were profound and had serious implications for Lebanese ‘identity’ by hindering the state’s role in establishing uniform norms surrounding ‘citizenship’ in Lebanon. Indeed, Salloukh et al. (2015, 33) note that by recognizing Lebanese as ‘citizens’ of the state, but also as members of their respective religious communities, the Lebanese were transformed into “sectarian subjects.” Traboulsi (2007, 109) also recognizes this tension, describing the Lebanese as both *muwatinin* and *ahlin* (*citizens* and *subjects* of differing religious communities). Anthropologist Suad Joseph (1999c, 164-5) observes:

[T]he Lebanese state built during the French Mandate and refined by the Lebanese elite after independence was premised on the notion of a nation fragmented by religious communities. [...]. Lebanese were not individualized citizens of a political community but stood before the state as members of prescribed sectarian communities.

³⁶ On the powers of the presidency within the 1926 constitution, Traboulsi notes: “The president of the republic was given extensive executive powers, helped by cabinet whose ministers he had the right to dismiss; yet he was responsible to no one and no institution except the French high commissioner” (2007, 90).

³⁷ It is also worth mentioning that scholars have argued that the school system in Lebanon has also worked to further divide the population along sectarian lines due to a noticeable lack of a national educational curriculum. “The structure of the school system helped to fragment the population on a sectarian basis. Most of the private schools were organized by religious sects serving their own membership. Private schools run by non-religious organizations often, nevertheless, served one sect or were predominately Muslim or Christian” (Joseph 1991, 190).

³⁸ The details of the handling personal status are contained in Article 9 of the 1926 constitution. “According to Article 9, the state relinquished to the religious communities its legislative rights and rulings on personal status (marriage, divorce, custody, adoption, inheritance, etc.) in the name of the freedom of religious belief” (Traboulsi 2007, 90). Salloukh et al. (2015, 32) also note: “Article 9 obliges the state ‘to render homage’ to God, ‘to respect all religions and sects and guarantee the freedom to hold religious rites under its protection,’ and to respect each sect’s ‘personal status law and their religious welfare.’”

Guaranteeing the autonomy of each community vis-à-vis issues of personal status also had the long-term consequence of removing the state's ability to act as an advocate for (or serious enforcer of) women's rights. As Joseph notes, the state, in these contexts, is "legally unavailable to its citizens" (2000, 130). Indeed, designed as it was, this system has never allowed for the development or establishment of any higher civic/state (read: secular) authority to which Lebanese men and women could appeal the decisions made in these courts³⁹ (Kingston 2013, 88; see also Salloukh et al. 2015, 34). The severely gendered dynamics of these complicated sets of arrangements, moreover, become more apparent when we recall the centrality of the family and kinship in Lebanon and the Arabic-speaking world (explored briefly in the previous chapter).⁴⁰

The family, for Arabs, is the core of society. And Arab families are generally patriarchal, meaning that males and elders (sometimes including elder women) are privileged over younger women and children (Joseph 1996, 194-5; see also Joseph 1994, 274). In the Arab world, Joseph (2000) describes what she calls 'the kin contract.' Through this contract, the "idea of family love is organized within a patriarchal structure of rights and responsibilities" (116). This familial organization, moreover, is not without purpose. It is, in fact, grounded in material realities as kin have long been the core of social identity, economic stability, political security, and religious affiliation (2000, 117). As Joseph (117) notes: "It has been the kin who care. It has been kin against whom one has had irrevocable rights and toward whom one has had religiously mandated [...] moral responsibilities." Importantly, religious institutions also figure into this social

³⁹ By spring of 1936, the Lebanese (mandatory) state had come to officially recognize the existence of eighteen different religious sects in the country – twelve Christian, five Muslim, and one Jewish – and, of course, their right to create and manage their own faith-based courts to handle their own matters relating to family law (*Qanun al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiya* in Arabic; Salloukh et al. 2015, 32). Fifteen different personal status codes would govern the 'personal status' affairs of the eighteen sects (Salloukh et al. 2015, 32).

⁴⁰ As an aside, I wonder if the centrality of family in Arab communities is (perhaps) also exemplified by how frequently I find myself referencing my own family (especially my parents) throughout my work. While this point is not necessarily critical to the discussion here, I thought it was still worth mentioning.

arrangement. Religious institutions – or more specifically, their leaders (imams, priests, etc.) – consider themselves to be the “guardians of family integrity” and believe that it is through families that religious sanctity can be safeguarded (Joseph 1996, 195). Indeed, clerics – more than other public figures – have been the ones to call on the Lebanese to care for their kin by attending to their needs, respecting and deferring to elders, and fulfill any/all required obligations towards kin (Joseph 2000, 119).

Understanding the complex relationship between religion and family, Joseph observes that ‘kinship evokes the highest moral authority in Lebanon, second only to religion’ (2000, 129; see also Joseph 1997a, 74). Indeed, so central is kinship to the Lebanese that the state sought to ‘sanctify’ it by reinscribing it in religion, thereby giving religion exclusive domain over kinship. This, she argues, can help us understand why the state opted to forfeit its control over family law to the country’s various religious sects. This institutionalized form of ‘legal multiculturalism’ she argues, has prevented the development of a common legal culture to be shared by all Lebanese, but more deeply impacts women and children as issues under the jurisdiction of ‘family law’ are very often central to their lives. Further, a Lebanese citizen’s birth group (i.e., the religion assigned to them at birth following the religion of their father) is used to determine which of the fifteen courts will subsequently handle their marriage, divorce, custody disputes, and inheritance claims.⁴¹ Thus, the experiences of Lebanese women (within this branch of the legal system) stand to be incredibly variable depending on which religion they follow. This not only means that differences exist across religions (Christianity versus Islam, for example), but even within

⁴¹ It should also be noted that citizens do have the right to ‘convert’ and can ‘change’ their sectarian affiliation. Though, all religious courts in Lebanon have tended to favor men in their judgements (Dabbous-Sensenig 2005; see also Salloukh et al. 2015, 43).

them (Sunni versus Shia, for example).⁴² This is further complicated when we consider that the majority of judges in the religious courts (across sects/religions) are men and have tended to favour men's claims in terms of custody, rights to divorce, and inheritance. Indeed, the problems that could arise from these arrangements are numerous. Women, for example, may feel compelled to remain in abusive/toxic marriages for fear of losing custody of their children to the father (Joseph 2000, 131). Further to the actions of religious officials, it is also important to note that they have used their power to police the boundaries of marriage itself, actively discouraging inter-sect or cross-religion marriages (Joseph 2000, 130-1). Thus, the state's absence from family law, combined with religious institutions' promotion of 'same sect' marriages, worked to enhance and strengthen the differences between the Lebanese people – i.e., by further solidifying their sectarian differences rather than their commonalities as Lebanese people (Joseph 1991, 191). Indeed, these realities make the observations of Lebanese feminist Yolla Polity-Sharara (1978) easier to understand:

It is hardly astonishing that in Lebanon more than in other places women experience politics as something foreign in their daily lives, since their lives are ruled by community laws and not national ones. The principal moments of their lives are punctuated by the intervention of men from their communities and religious authorities, rarely from the state.

Further still, personal status laws are not the only way Lebanese women experience the gendered dynamics of (patriarchal) kinship in Lebanon. Taking inspiration from French law which viewed children and women as 'property' of their men (fathers/husbands), the Lebanese

⁴² For example, Dima Dabbous-Sensenig (2005, 8) notes: "A Christian woman divorced because of adultery is not entitled to remarry. Child custody laws favor the Muslim father and the patrilineal family in general, with divorced Shi'ite mothers having custody of their children for a shorter period than Sunni mothers. In the area of inheritance, Lebanese Muslim women, unlike their Christian counterparts who get an equal share, inherit half what their brothers inherit in case one or both parents are dead."

nationality law was first promulgated in January of 1925 under the French Mandate and has remained (largely) unchanged ever since.⁴³ The law, described as “the clearest example of discrimination against women in the country,” traces citizenship along the father’s bloodline (Charafeddine 2010, 20). Indeed, Article 9 of the law notes that one is considered Lebanese if: they are born of a Lebanese father; if they are born in the Greater Lebanon territory and did not acquire a foreign nationality upon birth; and if they are born in the Greater Lebanon territory of unknown parents or to parents whose nationality is not known. Consequently, Lebanese women have been deprived of the ability to pass citizenship to their children – should their spouse be a foreigner. Importantly, Lebanese men are exempted from these strict rules. A Lebanese man, should he choose to marry a woman with foreign citizenship, is able to transfer Lebanese citizenship to her and their children. The citizenship law works to unite blood (understood in terms of male kinship ties – i.e., the father’s blood) to the workings of the state and nation (Joseph 2000, 129). This unity, moreover, has been especially harmful to women and children whose statuses have been more deeply impacted by the privileging of male bloodlines. Indeed, in her extensive field research on nationality in Lebanon, Charafeddine (2010, 33) notes that “crying is a common pattern” of behaviour amongst the impacted women she has interviewed.

In Lebanon, the personal status laws and the formal law governing the transference of nationality are – as we have discussed – serious impediments to women’s achievement of full citizenship. The processes launched under the Mandate continue today as, as Joseph (2000, 112) notes, the country’s first constitution in 1943 following independence was a reproduction of the original from 1926 ‘with little modification.’ As we will see below, changing or removing both

⁴³ The full text of the nationality law can be found here: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/44a24c6c4.pdf>. (Accessed February 17, 2021). As noted above, small changes have been made to the nationality law, but the crucial aspect – women’s inability to pass citizenship to children – has remained intact since its promulgation.

of these obstacles has proven to be (as of yet) an insurmountable hurdle in Lebanon. The next section of this chapter, thus, intends to explore some of the dynamics impacting women's activism in post-war Lebanon (though, given the severity of the Civil War, I do begin with a brief discussion of the conflict for context).

Wartime and Post-War Dynamics

i. Civil War

The Lebanese Civil War was all-consuming. Every facet of life in Lebanon was impacted. Food and water shortages occurred; medicines were limited; schooling was interrupted; and many Lebanese lived in a constant state of fear. Women's activism, too, was impacted. As several observers have noted, it was largely 'put on hold' because of more pressing concerns, not least of which was basic survival. The work of the Lebanese Council of Women, too, would become inactive during this time (Stephan 2012, 116; 2014; see also Kingston 2013, 94). Long-time activist Laure Moghaizel, for example, has observed: "[T]here was no improvement in women's status due to the war... Before the war, we amended several laws, such as equality in inheritance, the right to choose one's nationality upon marriage, and so forth; but the situation remained stagnant [during the war]."⁴⁴ The idealism that inspired women's activists to work throughout the 1960s and early 1970s to achieve (even modest) gains for women in

⁴⁴ Taken from a 1995 interview with Moghaizel conducted by Hania Osseiran. The interview can be accessed online here: <http://www.alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ/article/view/880/876>. (Accessed February 20, 2021). It should also be noted that Moghaizel still sought to remain active during the Civil War. Together with her husband, Joseph, the couple continued to challenge the state for reforms to end legal discrimination against women. The strength of her political and social connections (and dedication to women's issues) was evidenced in her personal relationships with other women's rights groups and organizations in Lebanon. Indeed, working through her networks and relying on these connections, they successfully achieved the elimination of legal punishments for using or selling contraceptives in 1983 (Stephan 2012, 116; see also Kingston 2013, 96). In 1985, the couple established the Lebanese Human Rights Association and – as we shall see below – continued to champion human rights in the country throughout the 1990s (Stephan 2012, 116; 2010, 538).

Lebanon was, as Stephan (2014) notes, “one of the victims of the 15-year Civil War, during which the arming of all sides and their violent confrontation pushed women’s issues to the side.”

Activist energy during the War was turned towards humanitarian work (Daou 2015; Stephan 2014; see also Pratt 2020, 105-6; Makdisi 1996, 246-7; Polity-Sharara 1978). Some women sought to promote peace and end the ferocious violence. Moghaizel has noted how she participated in numerous peace-promoting efforts, including sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations. In one instance of such efforts, she recalled working on a campaign called “The Document of Civil Peace,” which was a petition signed by 70,000 Lebanese who were against the War. Others sought to provide forms of aid. “Women’s organizations that had been set up for peaceful struggle in the public sphere for civil rights were transformed by circumstances into agencies that dispersed welfare services to refugees and war victims” (Stephan 2014). Women who participated within militias and/or political parties, too, occupied similar roles: “They formed aid teams, provided help for the injured, welcomed refugee families, gave food for the fighters, sewed sheets and linens for the hospitals” (Polity-Sharara 1978).⁴⁵

Thus, during this time, activities focusing on Lebanese women’s rights were largely “dismissed,” subordinated to the more immediate concerns of survival in a state of war (Stephen 2014; see also Khalaf 2010). Following the conclusion of the War, however, women’s rights advocacy in Lebanon would be revived.

ii. *International Women, CEDAW, and Laure Moghaizel*

⁴⁵While it is somewhat outside the scope of the work here, it is certainly worth mentioning that Palestinian refugee women living in Lebanon (particularly within refugee camps) at the time, too, faced incredible hardships. And just like their Lebanese counterparts, worked tirelessly to offer what services they could, such as cooking, cleaning wounds, and even delivering babies. (For more see: Pratt 2020, 106-8).

In 1975, the United Nations formally launched its Decade for Women during the First World Conference for Women in Mexico City. Following this, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 – while Lebanon was in the throes of its Civil War. CEDAW is “often described as an international bill of rights for women.”⁴⁶ Subsequent conferences held in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) also reaffirmed the international community’s commitment to women’s issues, such as poverty, education, experiences with violence, health, etc.⁴⁷ The crown jewel of this reinvigorated international concern for women’s issues, however, was the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 – only several years after the Lebanese Civil War had formally concluded and (a measure of) stability had returned to the country.

The timing of Beijing conference could not have been better for the small group of women’s activists who hoped to revive the country’s stagnant women’s movement and awaken the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW) from its Civil War-induced slumber (Kingston 2013, 94). These women, known as the ‘Beijing Group,’ believed that, given the Council’s historic unity between Muslims and Christians, it offered the greatest opportunities for inclusiveness and unity in the post-war context (95). These women worked hard to breathe new life into the LCW.⁴⁸ They updated the structure of the organization to include regional representation. They

⁴⁶ See CEDAW’s page on the UN Women website: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>. (Accessed February 21, 2021).

⁴⁷ For more on these conferences: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>. (Accessed February 21, 2021).

⁴⁸ Currently, the LCW exists as a large umbrella organization uniting nearly 170 different NGOs and associations from across Lebanon. While a detailed discussion of the LCW is out of the scope here, it should be mentioned that scholars have argued that the LCW has not really been a “prime mover” in post-war women’s activism (Kingston 2013, 120). Critics argue that the organization’s leadership is primarily representative older generations of activism and has tended to focus its efforts towards charitable contributions, more than actual legal activism. (For a more thorough discussion of the LCW in post-war Lebanon, please see Kingston 2013, 120-125). The official LCW website can be found here: <http://www.lcw-cfl.org/?page=introduction>. (Accessed February 21, 2021).

held new executive elections. Most significantly, they successfully lobbied to create their own mechanism to participate in Beijing: the National Committee for the Preparation of and the Participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women.

It is also worth mentioning that parallel to these developments within the LCW, Lebanon (like other countries in the Middle East) saw a rapid growth in the number of NGOs working on various issues relating to discrimination against women, education, people with disabilities, democratization, etc. (Pratt 2020, 115; see also Salloukh et al. 2015, 54; Daou 2015; Stephan 2014). Scholars argue that Lebanese feminists took advantage of the greater international attention to women's issues (in particular) and NGOs in the country flourished in the 1990s.⁴⁹ Some view this proliferation of NGOs as a positive development in Lebanon because these groups were able strengthen their connections to the state through “partnerships” to provide social welfare services and “design the future of gender relations in the country” (Stephan 2014; 2012, 120). Others, however, are more critical of these developments and place them in the larger context of the country's sectarian system. Salloukh et al. (2015, 46-8, 53-4) argue that the post-war (neoliberal-inspired) Lebanese state, governed as it was by its sectarian elite, sought to delegate socio-economic/welfare services through NGOs affiliated with their sectarian political parties – as means to ‘buy’ electoral support, for example.⁵⁰ They argue that NGOs were invited

⁴⁹ While it is somewhat outside the scope of the work here (and much has been written about NGOs within international relations and political science, broadly), it is important that an important controversy surrounding NGOs relates to their funding. Critics argue that NGOs become beholden to their foreign donors and their concerns, rather than those of the local context allowing their initiatives to become ‘NGO-ized.’ “Their operations,” Salloukh et al. (2015, 58) argue, “are consequently deeply affected by the politics of international aid.” NGO strategies, therefore, become focused more on ‘reform’ than ‘revolution,’ thereby working – essentially – to largely support and maintain the existing system.

⁵⁰ Indeed, the Lebanese state funds a host of sectarian NGOs that offer a number of welfare services, including free education, orphanages, health care, etc. This money is funnelled to these organizations through not only the Prime Minister's office, but also through various federal ministries, including interior, labour, social affairs, etc. The Ministry of Social Affairs, for example, allocates nearly seventy percent of its budget to religious associations. The Ministry, moreover, is largely unable to monitor the quality of the services offered by these institutions as many are directly connected to the patronage networks of the country's political elite (Salloukh et al. 2015, 47). Cammett

in to fill the gaps left behind by the weak post-war state. NGOs, they continue, “internalized” this relationship and relegated themselves to forms of ‘legal militancy,’ whereby they promoted the adoption of non-discriminatory laws (2015, 54). Groups began to ‘specialize’ in particular areas of (legal) discrimination and this further contributed to their fragmentation, preventing the emergence of a unified movement that could actually pose a serious challenge the sectarian system and bring about “more inclusive forms of citizenship for both men and women” (Salloukh et al. 2015, 55).⁵¹

Mirroring the growth of these (secular) women’s NGOs, interestingly, has been the increased growth in the number of women participating in religious, community-based volunteer charity organizations (*jam’iyyas*). Writing of the Shia community in South Beirut, for example, Lara Deeb (2006) – mentioned earlier – has described this process in great detail. Her work complicates women’s civic engagement in Lebanon by connecting it more explicitly to longstanding feelings of exclusion and marginalization within the Shia community. She notes how Shia Muslims have suffered disproportionately through various Lebanese conflicts – the Civil War and even the 2006 Israeli bombing of Lebanon. These experiences, she explains, inspired some of her participants to form a sect-consciousness that compelled them to work with *jam’iyyas* to help their community because it was deemed inappropriate for women to ‘pick up guns’ and actively join various forms of armed resistance (2006, 200-205). Thus, while the work of these organizations may not be *explicitly* political – in that they campaign for rights, etc., for

(2014, chapter 6) also details how each of Lebanon’s major political parties (Future, AMAL, Hezbollah, and the country’s various Christian parties) have manipulated the provision of social welfare services to achieve specific political ends, namely electoral support from their respective religious groups by strengthening their patronage networks.

⁵¹ Suad Joseph (1997b), relatedly, characterizes feminist groups in post-war Lebanon as individualized ‘little shops’ (*dakakeen*), arguing that while they can (and do) promote beneficial changes in the lives of women, their factionalism largely prevents them from “offering the basis for an autonomous, liberatory women’s movement” (59).

example – women’s participation within them, Deeb suggests, can be understood in political terms. While these organizations are not explicitly the focus of my work here, these cases do work to highlight the complexity and diversity of women’s civic and community engagement in Lebanon.

The 1990s also saw continued activism from Laure and Joseph Moghaizel that has left incredibly important marks on gender activism in Lebanon. First, in June of 1990, a delegation from the Human Rights Association (founded by the couple during the Civil War) visited Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss and lobbied for including explicit reference to the UN Charter and the International Declaration of Human Rights. They were successful and Lebanese parliamentarians amended the Lebanese Constitution.⁵² Second, the crowning achievement of their lifetime of activism was their successful pressuring of the Lebanese state to sign and ratify CEDAW on April 1997 (Stephan 2010, 539).⁵³ The ratification of CEDAW was momentous for feminist activists in Lebanon, not because it stood to revolutionize the sectarian context within which they operated, but because it offered feminists a legal platform from which they could create new opportunities (Kingston 2013, 97). Indeed, in commenting on CEDAW, Linda Matar, former president of Lebanese Council of Women, described it as being “like a weapon for us” (quoted in Kingston 2013, 97-8). As with most things in Lebanon, however, this achievement, too, required qualification on account of sectarianism. In its ratification of CEDAW, the Lebanese government had reservations and denied the Convention jurisdiction over the penal code, nationality law, and

⁵² These references are included in Part 1.B of the Preamble to the Lebanese Constitution. The Lebanese Constitution can be found here: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Lebanon_2004.pdf?lang=en. (Accessed February 21, 2021).

⁵³ The ratification date for Lebanon can be found here: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=96&Lang=EN. (Accessed February 21, 2021).

issues of persona status. These reservations – as we will see in the next section – are demonstrative of the power of sectarianism Lebanon. Third, and perhaps most significantly, Laure Moghaizel’s ‘case-by-case’ strategy⁵⁴ for achieving legal reform has inspired later generations of activists. Indeed, as Rita Stephan (2014) notes: “Lebanese style of activism [...] has more often taken the course of ‘small steps’ advocated by Laure Moghaizel, remaining within the parameters of Lebanon’s political, religious, and social structures...”

iii. The Power of Sectarianism, Civil Marriage, and Nationality Reform

While Lebanese feminists have been somewhat successful in achieving incremental (primarily legal) gains for women, they have been unable to uproot the sectarian structure that works to empower the country’s religious/political elite (largely at the expense of women). Indeed, as noted above, this is not only evidenced in the state’s significant reservations to CEDAW regarding personal status and nationality, but also in the religious/political elite’s quick mobilization to shut down activist efforts to promote ‘optional civil marriage’ and their unwillingness to address nationality reform. Thus, while not explicitly the focus of this work, it remains useful to briefly review these examples to better understand the level of “hostility” (to use Laure Moghaizel’s word) displayed by the Lebanese political/religious elite regarding these sorts of reforms.

My reader will recall from our earlier discussion that ‘the family’ and religious institutions are very closely connected in Lebanon – as in much of the Arab world.

⁵⁴ On Laure Moghaizel’s strategy for reform, Paul Kingston (2013, 96) notes: “Her method consisted of compiling inventories of various discriminatory laws and regulations, preparing concrete modifications using examples from reforms in other countries (especially the Arab world), targeting laws on a case-by-case basis rather than more comprehensively so as to not disaffect the political classes, mobilizing public support for the proposed changes by taking advantage of the backing of associations and the media, and, perhaps most important, cultivating and taking advantage of connections with those in political society.”

Understanding this connection, the Lebanese state (first under the mandate, but then again in 1943 after independence) relinquished control over family law to the country's numerous religious sects. Issues relating to marriage and divorce, therefore, are handled exclusively within religious courts – with no state oversight and no avenues for Lebanese citizens to appeal the decisions made in these courts.⁵⁵ To be sure, various segments of the Lebanese society have, in the years since independence, criticized the absence of a civil personal status code. Indeed, according to *Human Rights Watch* (2015), for example, Lebanese Bar Associations went on strike for nearly six months in 1951 to protest the absence of a civil personal status code and the expansion of the powers of Christian courts under President Khouri (see also El-Cheikh 2001, 27; Thompson 2000, 289). While more recent efforts (in 2011 and 2014) have sought to bring about measured personal status reforms, the fact that they largely went nowhere, perhaps because the post-war Lebanese political and religious elite had already made their opposition to reform very clear in the mid/late 1990s.⁵⁶

Indeed, the most serious attempt to bring about optional civil marriage in Lebanon was under President Hrawi. In 1996, Hrawi announced his commitment to the establishment of a civil marriage code Lebanon. He assembled a cross-sect committee of legal experts to draft the prospective law – though agreement between Muslims and Christians over issues of inheritance

⁵⁵ Importantly, under current Lebanese law, couples must be married by religious officials or in a religious contract. When two individuals of different religions wish to wed, one, often the woman, must (at least on paper) convert. For those who wish to avoid religious marriages entirely (and have the financial means) very often travel to Cyprus to have a civil ceremony. Civil marriages conducted outside Lebanon are recognized by the state, but the couple is then 'attached' to the civil code of the country where their marriage took place (Zuhur 2002, 197).

⁵⁶ In 2011, for example, a number of NGOs submitted a draft proposal of civil marriage to Parliament, but it was never even debated (Human Rights Watch 2015). In 2014, too, Lebanese Minister of Justice Shakib Qortabwi submitted a draft law to Parliament to allow Lebanese to conduct optional civil marriages inside Lebanon but requiring married couples to choose a foreign civil code to follow (should they need a divorce, for example; al-Husseini 2014). Additionally, the proposed law required the couple to pay \$333.00 USD to the religious court of the husband's sect, or the wife's sect if the husband was foreign. This proposal, like others before it, was also not adopted.

and the marriage of Muslim women to Christian men (which is forbidden in Islam) could not be reached (Salloukh et al. 2015, 39). Nonetheless, President Hrawi announced the law in mid-February of 1998. It sought to strip religious institutions of their sweeping authority over a number of areas: definitions of marriage, adoption, child custody, forbids the practice of polygamy (allowed in some Muslim sects), and also eased the restrictions on inter-sect marriage (El-Cheikh 2001, 28; Kingston 2013, 111; Salloukh et al. 2015, 39-40; Zuhur 2002, 182). Facing such dramatic changes in their status (particularly their ability to involve themselves in the workings of Lebanese families), Lebanon's Christian and Muslim religious elite fiercely opposed the law (Salloukh et al. 2015, 41).

The strongest opposition came from the Sunni religious establishment (Zuhur 2002, 185). Rooting their objections within the longtime connection between religion and family, Sunni clerics maintained that civil marriage 'heralded the end of the family.' Lebanon's Sunni Grand Mufti Muhammad Rashid Qabbani stated that "there are limits that will never allow anyone to trespass... Religion and family are red lines..." (quoted in El-Cheikh 2001, 29-30). Sunni clerics' outrage over the law had a "disciplining" effect on the other religious communities in the country (Kingston 2013, 111-2). Indeed, not to be outdone by the zealotry of their Sunni counterparts, Shia clerics quickly overcame the initial calmness with which they vocalized their objections to the law, suggesting that the law would result in marriages not sanctified in the eyes of God. Prominent Shia religious scholar Muhammad Fadlallah, for example, suggested that the law would "legalize adultery" – i.e., couples living in 'sin' (El-Cheikh 2001, 32). The Maronite Christian Patriarch, Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, also loudly vocalized his objection to the law, threatening Christians who submitted to it with excommunication (Kingston 2013, 112).

Hrawi presented his draft law to cabinet in March of 1998. While the draft law was approved by cabinet through a binding two-thirds majority vote, it still required the Prime Minister to send it to Parliament for final approval. Prime Minister Hariri, despite himself having had a civil marriage, refused to send the law to Parliament. And here we can see how members of the Lebanese political elite “fell into line,” intimidated by the severity of the religious reactions to the law (Kingston 2013, 112). While scholars note that why he chose to do this “remains a puzzle,” (Salloukh et al. 2015, 41), it is speculated that the law could have interfered with his own political ambitions by undermining sectarian unification amongst Sunnis (Kingston 2013, 113; see also Salloukh et al. 2015, 41). Nonetheless, the end result was that civil marriage was essentially left for dead in the murky sectarian political waters. Religious institutions were successful in their campaign to maintain their largely uncontested hegemony over critical junctures in women’s lives vis-à-vis personal status. The events of 1998, in sum, appear to confirm the earlier observations of Palestinian/Lebanese writer Jean Said Makdisi (sister to the famed scholar Edward Said) on the rigidity of personal status laws in Lebanon (1996, 236): “These laws, [...] it seems clear to me, will remain fixed and immutable as long as the present political and social make-up of the land continues, and as long as religious and clerical power [...] persists, hampering free discussion, especially of personal issues, and blocking action towards change.”

Importantly, religious and political forces in Lebanon have not only been incredibly resistant to forms of personal status reform but also strongly opposed altering the country’s nationality law. Recalling our earlier discussions, Lebanese nationality is traced patrilineally. Consequently, Lebanese women cannot transfer citizenship to their children or their foreign spouses. Given the seriousness of this inequality, we can ask why the Lebanese state has allowed

this to continue since the mid-1920s. The oft-cited justification maintains that it is upheld out of concern for the Palestinians. If the laws were altered, floodgates would open, and Palestinians would rush to acquire Lebanese citizenship. In turn, this would undermine Palestinian negotiations with Israel vis-à-vis the right of return to (what may someday become) an independent Palestinian state. Critics, however, argue that the Lebanese political and religious elite are far less altruistic and their unwillingness to reform the law is primarily demographic.

Concerns over Lebanon's delicate 'sectarian balance' often inspire the harshest opposition to reforming the law. As explained earlier, the entire Lebanese political structure is a complicated balancing act between the country's Muslim and Christian populations. In such a system, numbers are incredibly important. Not only was the 1932 census used to establish the system, the fact that there has not been another census since, too, suggests just how rigid the system has become. Palestinians, moreover, are majority Sunni Muslim. Should Palestinian (Sunni) men be able to acquire citizenship through marriage to Lebanese (Sunni) women, the country's demographics to change – in a way likely favoring Sunnis. This is not lost on Lebanon's political and religious elite. Indeed, it explains why Sunni Prime Ministers have, in the past, declared their commitment to reforming the nationality law, because reform could stand to expand the Sunni population in Lebanon and, by extension, their support base (Salloukh et al. 2015, 64).⁵⁷ It also explains why (Maronite) Christian politicians and priests are, perhaps, the fiercest opponents to reforming the law. Keenly aware of their declining demographics, they fear their community's further dilution by Muslims. Indeed, it also seems that statistics appear to

⁵⁷ Though, interestingly, Sunni Prime Ministers have also expressed strong feelings against the naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon. Former Prime Ministers Rafik Hariri and Salim al-Hoss, for example, have both spoken out against the naturalization of Palestinians in Lebanon, arguing that they would 'forget their homeland,' and that as Lebanese nationals they would not be cared for by international aid agencies, presumably making them dependent on Lebanon's (already weak) social welfare infrastructure (Haddad 2004).

justify their concerns. According to a 2009 UNDP study by Fahima Charafeddine, the largest percentage of marriages between Lebanese women and non-Lebanese men is amongst Sunnis. Of these Sunni marriages, 38% were between Lebanese women and Palestinian men.⁵⁸

While Lebanese feminists have long been critical of the law, activism around the law has been a fairly recent development amongst Lebanon's post-war feminist activist community. The Beirut-based organization, *Collective for Training, Research, and Development-Action* (CTRD-A), for example, began a domestic nationality campaign – known as “My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family” – in 2001.⁵⁹ The campaign has been praised for its work to reach out to and mobilize women who are negatively impacted by the law (Kingston 2013, 102). In the words of the organization's founder, Lina Abou Habib: “We're doing a lot of community awareness raising on citizenship, etc. And the main observation from what we have been doing over the past year is that definitely there is a reaction, definitely what we're trying to communicate is ringing a bell. Yes, there's a lot of negative reactions, but at the same time we're finding a lot of support in all sorts of different places” (quoted in Stephan 2012, 126). Their campaign, however, has been marked by inter-group competition.

Women's groups, for example, have left their working relationship with the CRTD-A and launched their own campaigns on the issue. Indeed, the coalition, *al-Liqa' al-Watani*, launched their own campaign in 2005, with a different proposal: women should be able to transfer their citizenship to their children, but not their foreign spouses. In 2008, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Lebanon awarded funding to another association, NGO Coalition (*al-Lajna al-Ahliyya*), to launch their own campaign for nationality reform. This

⁵⁸ The 2009 UNDP study can be found here:

http://www.undp.org.lb/communication/publications/downloads/mujaz_en.pdf. (Accessed February 25, 2021).

⁵⁹ For more on the CRTD-A, see their official website: <https://crt-da.org.lb/about>. (Accessed February 25, 2021).

divisiveness has also been exacerbated by competition over the grants offered by foreign donors, like the UNDP. The result of this competition has been the creation of confusion amongst both the women impacted by the law and sympathetic parliamentarians. Both groups wait for a unified campaign on the issue to present a coherent proposal for reform (Kingston 2013, 102-3).

While these early divisions and obstacles may have hindered or stunted the activist efforts of the CRTD-A, their nationality campaign – at the time of writing – is still ongoing (though in a modified sense due to the COVID-19 pandemic).⁶⁰ Though, that the campaign has been ongoing for nearly twenty years and no significant changes have been made to Lebanon's nationality law, I believe, speaks not only to the marginalization of women's activists' efforts within Lebanon's political sphere, but – significantly – to the determination of the country's political elite to resist gender-based reform.

iv. *Post-War Patriarchy: NCLW and Ministry for Women's Affairs*

Even in the face of the serious obstacles presented by clerical and political authorities in Lebanon, women's activists have recognized that such opposition cannot possibly be limitless and have still directed their efforts at the state, including seeking to establish institutions for women *within* the state itself. Indeed, as part and parcel of the activism of the 'Beijing Group' (mentioned earlier), campaigned – backed by foreign donors – to establish the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) in 1996 (Kingston 2013, 116). In 1998, the NCLW was formally embedded within the structures of the Lebanese state, becoming an "official institution affiliated to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers."⁶¹ (A development that scholars note was not met with much enthusiasm by Lebanese parliamentarians.) This

⁶⁰ See, for example: <https://crt-da.org.lb/node/16301>. (Accessed February 27, 2021).

⁶¹ Taken from the NCLW's official website: <https://nclw.gov.lb/en/mission-and-vision-2/>. (Accessed February 27, 2021).

institutionalization, however, also explains why the NCLW “has made little to no impact as a channel for women’s advocacy efforts” (Kingston 2013, 116).

Indeed, many of the problems associated with the NCLW, Kingston argues, are inherent in its very design (2013, 116). First, the NCLW is not an autonomous body. It exists as a quasi-extension of the Office of the Prime Minister. Symbolic of this political attachment, moreover, are the mechanisms through which appointments to the NCLW are made. The President of the NCLW is appointed by the President of the Republic and the remaining members (often twenty-four other women) are appointed by the Prime Minister.⁶² Importantly, these appointments have not only been made with considerations to sectarianism – therefore reflecting the overall dynamics of the Lebanese political structure as a whole – but have also involved forms of nepotism. Political officials often nominate their wives (and more recently, daughters). The current President of the NCLW, for example, is Claudine Aoun Roukoz, the daughter of current Lebanese President Michel Aoun. To this end, the NCLW has been reduced to an elitist organization whose members are largely unaware of or inexperienced in the promotion of women’s issues (117). Second, the budget of the NCLW is small and not permanent, subjecting the organization to the “whims of the Office of Prime Minister” and making it reliant on foreign donations (117-8). Limited resources, therefore, have cooperated with the limiting effects of its embeddedness within the Lebanese political system, to restrict the advocacy capacities of the NCLW. Finally, the NCLW has never acted as a sort of ‘network node’ (to use Kingston’s [2013, 118] phrasing) for other civil society actors. The organization has typically occupied a secondary position, while other NGOs in the country have sought to promote various rights-focused campaigns. These ‘design flaws’ of the NCLW, moreover, have cooperated to hinder its

⁶² Taken from the NCLW’s official website: <https://nclw.gov.lb/en/mission-and-vision-2/>. (Accessed February 27, 2021).

ability to act as a serious advocate for Lebanese women within the state apparatus. Indeed, as Kingston notes, his research participants (in spring/summer 2008) had come realize that the NCLW was an inadequate institution for women's advocacy within the state and called for the establishment of a Ministry for Women to better handle women's issues within the state (2013, 119).

Significantly, shortly after the formation of their new government in 2016, President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced the creation of a new Ministry of State for Women's Affairs, that would be led by Minister Jean Ogasapaian, of Hariri's own Future Party.⁶³ I argue, however, that a number of the problems Kingston (2013) identified within the NCLW are also applicable to the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs (MSWA), as it was founded in 2016.

To begin with, the creation of a ministry to cater exclusively to the needs of Lebanese women was not met with great enthusiasm on the part of parliamentarians. Ogasapian has even commented on the difficulty involved in selling the idea to cabinet, noting that he had the MSWA "smuggled through" by presenting it as part-and-parcel of a UNDP initiative (quoted in Azhari 2018). Relatedly, this connection to the UNDP also had an impact on the MSWA's functionality. As Ogasapaian (2017) explained to me: "In the beginning, I had nothing. [...]. [W]e signed along with the UNDP and I made this ministry a UN program because it's more flexible and you have credibility with the international donors." Consequently, the MSWA

⁶³ Importantly, while this section is concerned with the 2016 establishment of the Lebanese Ministry for Women's Affairs (and my interviewees' perceptions of it in summer 2017), the 2018 Lebanese elections and the government formed afterwards brought about a number of important changes. First, the Ministry was to be led by a female, Violette Khairallah Safadi. Second, shortly after her appointment, Khairallah Safadi decided to remedy some of the initial problems/controversies associated with the Ministry, namely its title. Arguing that women's affairs are intimately connected to other social structures, the Ministry for Women's Affairs is now formally known as the *Ministry of State for the Economic Empowerment of Women and Youth*. Further, at the time of writing (February 2021), the Ministry no longer has an operational website.

appeared to be set up for a future where it would become more concerned with chasing funds from international donors, than with using its unique embeddedness within the state to lobby for change within existing political structures. Indeed, Ogasapaian also explained to me that one of the main objectives of the MSWA was to “support” local NGOs in the various efforts to promote women’s rights in Lebanon. In this way, it seemed that the MSWA, like the NCLW, was destined to take a backseat role in gender activism in Lebanon, while local NGOs would remain in the driver’s seat.

Further, the relative isolation in which the MSWA was “smuggled in” did not sit well with Lebanese gender activists and feminists who found its founding to be both patronizing and frustrating. Interestingly, these views were shared by more religious and more secular women’s activists. Rabab al-Sadr, of the (Shia) Imam Al-Sadr foundation,⁶⁴ for example, criticized the founding of the MSWA, noting that the government “did not communicate with any organization” (2017). Similarly, others have suggested that this lack of consultation was suggestive of the Lebanese government’s determination to “keep women away from government” (quoted in Massena 2017). Indeed, this idea of keeping women out was literally communicated to Lebanese women (and activists) by the appointment of a male parliamentarian to head the MSWA, a decision that even made international headlines (Taylor 2016). Once again, it seemed that Lebanese men were given control over issues relevant to women. And this was not on Lebanese women. Prominent journalist Mariam Al-Bassam (2017), for example,

⁶⁴ While the majority of the majority of the activists I spoke with during my fieldwork were involved with more secular NGOs, I did speak with Rabab Al-Sadr of the Imam Al-Sadr Foundation. It was formally founded in 1984. The organization is actively involved in the promotion of female literacy, employment, and empowerment. More information on the organization can be found here: <https://www.imamsadrfoundation.org/about-us/history/17/1/>. (Accessed March 1, 2021).

explained that she felt that Ogasapian's appointment was the government "laughing at us."⁶⁵

Roula Masri, Director of Programmes for feminist NGO *ABAAD*, went further, arguing that the MSWA's creation was just another example of Lebanese political parties "instrumentalizing" women's rights to "bait and beat" one another.⁶⁶ Others took care to position the MSWA within Lebanon's sectarian system. Longtime activist Aaida Nasrallah with the League for Lebanese Women's Rights,⁶⁷ for example, explained to me that she believed Hariri's decision to appoint Ogasapian as minister may have had less to do with him being a man and more to do with Hariri's efforts to "make the Armenians happy because they did not have a ministry."

While the MSWA was still a young institution at the time of my fieldwork interviews, the dynamics at work in its founding – namely the exclusion of women and the selection of a male as its first 'leader' – make (more) visible the Lebanese government's commitment to patriarchy. Given these dimensions, it is likely that the WSMA, like the NCLW, will not only become an institution that largely leaves the messy business of activism to Lebanon's NGOs, but may actually work to reinforce the state's firm (if not militant) resistance against rights-based change that stands to undermine the power of sectarian politicians and religious leaders.

v. *Women in Parliament – Adding to the Difficulty*

The situation in Lebanon is further complicated by women's very low participation in parliamentary politics – that is, their representation in Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies (*Majlis*

⁶⁵ Mariam Al-Bassam is a well-known journalist currently working with the Lebanese television network, *Al-Jadeed*. She is, perhaps, most famously known for her in-person interview with Hassan Nasrallah, the controversial leader of Hezbollah (see Bishop 2006).

⁶⁶ ABAAD is a secular, feminist NGO operating in Lebanon, focusing on gender-based violence and gender equality. It was founded in 2011. More information on the organization can be found on their website: <https://www.abaadmena.org>. (Accessed March 1, 2021).

⁶⁷ The League for Lebanese Women's Rights is one of the country's oldest secular NGOs working on women's issues. It was established in 1947. More information on the League can be found on their website: <https://llwr.org/من-نحن/>. (Accessed March 1, 2021).

an-Nuwwab). Importantly, there is no formal prohibition of female participation in politics and Lebanese women, as noted earlier, have had the right to seek and hold office since 1953, Lebanese politics is still largely a male domain, with only a handful of women having served in the Chamber. Indeed, the *Interparliamentary Union's* most recent report from February 2021 (which examined the data from Lebanon's most recent elections in 2018) ranks Lebanon 183rd out of 188 for female representation. In fact, every single Arab and Middle Eastern country – with the exceptions of Yemen, Oman, and Kuwait – was ranked higher than Lebanon.⁶⁸ Of the 128 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, only six are held by women. In terms of percentages, this means that women constitute less than five percent of the parliament. But what accounts for this low participation?

Explaining this phenomenon, I believe, requires us to recall that patriarchy runs deep in Lebanon – even within the dynamics of its parliament. Parliamentary seats, like Lebanese citizenship, are very often “inherited” along (or through) male bloodlines (El-Khazen 2000, 51; Hanf 1993, 75; Khalife 2009; Khatib 2008, 444; Schulze 1998, 162-3). Examples of this patrilineality in Lebanon are numerous: former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, for example, is the son of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri; parliamentarian Nadim Gemayel is the son of former President-elect Bachir Gemayel; former Prime Minister Tamam Salam is the son of former Prime Minister Saeb Salam; parliamentarian Faisal Karami is the son of former Prime Minister Omar Karami. This is, importantly, not an exhaustive list by any means.

The Lebanese understand this ‘father-to-son’ process well. So well, in fact, that there is a popular saying to describe the limited instances where women do enter politics. “Women enter

⁶⁸ The *Interparliamentary Union's* ranking can be found here: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=2&year=2021>. (Accessed February 28, 2021).

parliament dressed in black,” they say.⁶⁹ They wear black, it is observed, because they often take the seats of their deceased fathers or husbands, further highlighting processes of patrilineal succession. While it is not necessarily true of every female parliamentarian, the saying is not without warrant. Former parliamentarian Nayla Tuani, for example, began her political career in 2009, several years after the assassination of her father, former MP Gebran Tuani. Former MP Nayla Moawad, too, began her political career in 1991, shortly after the assassination of her husband, former President René Moawad in 1989. In these instances, moreover, women are viewed as extensions of their male relatives. Indeed, this was the observation of Moawad herself: “Carrying my husband’s name has given my voice added weight. I have not had to start from scratch to prove myself” (quoted in LaTeef 1997, 201).⁷⁰ The 2005 UN CEDAW report on Lebanon confirmed that successful female candidates have often relied on traditional factors, including political heritage, funding, and support from authority (United Nations 2005, 44).⁷¹

Recognizing the need for greater female participation, there has been talk in Lebanon of implementing a quota. Talks and proposals regarding a parliamentary gender quota in 2006 and again 2010 both, as scholars note, went nowhere (Helou 2009; El-Makari 2009). The quota issue resurfaced again in 2017 during debates surrounding electoral reforms leading up to the 2018 federal elections. Following the guidelines set by CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, the quota would ‘reserve’ thirty percent of parliamentary seats for women – and, in theory, open

⁶⁹ Joseph (1997a, 81) also references this popular Lebanese saying in her explanation of the low rates of female representation in Parliament. Significantly, while this saying is now common in Lebanon, it is attributed to Laure Moghaizel (Ekmekji 2005; El-Makari 2009).

⁷⁰ Similarly, in another interview, Moawad not only demonstrated her keen awareness of patrilineality, but also its impact on women’s low participation rates: “[O]ur patriarchal society, whose political system is based on family and sect still poses a hinderance for women” (quoted in Sfeir 2001, 47).

⁷¹ The 2018 elections appear to confirm this observation as well. Of the six women elected, five were directly affiliated with one of Lebanon’s established political parties (New Arab 2018; see also Yan 2019). Only one female – prominent journalist Paula Yacoubian – ran as an independent and was elected. Though, her status as a nationally-known television personality and journalist likely assisted her election.

up the institution for a greater diversity of women. But the idea of imposing a quota was highly controversial. Young gender activists, for example, were torn on the issue. Alia Awada, of NGO *Fe-Male*, for example, that she believed a quota was the only way to “force” political parties to change their ways and include more women on their candidate lists (2017).⁷² Maya Ammar, Communications Director of secular, feminist NGO *KAFA*,⁷³ explained to me that while she believed not all women are going to be “feminists,” more women in Parliament would still make the institution “more sensitive” to women’s issues (2017). Others, however, appeared to take a more ‘realpolitik-inspired’ stance, noting that forcing parties to include women would actually do very little in Lebanon. It would only, as one activist explained to me, “change the face but leave the message.” She speculated that parties would simply include “their wives and daughters” to fill the quota requirements (Masri 2017). But this controversy, moreover, extended beyond the borders of Lebanon’s female activist community. Lebanon’s political parties, too, were divided on the issue. One (Sunni) parliamentarian from the Future party, for example, explained to me that he did not believe that the quota would work in Lebanon because (predominantly Shia) parties like AMAL and Hezbollah are ‘not ready’ to take women on their candidate lists (Jarrah 2017). Given some parties’ firm rejection of the idea, he believed women were left with “no chance.” Indeed, a number of parliamentarians belonging to Hezbollah refused to even discuss the idea of a gender quota in Parliament, walking out before the discussion began. A spokesperson for the group would later explain to journalists that the party is strongly against a quota because women’s “main goals” are to “bring up generations” and that

⁷² Fe-male is secular, feminist NGO operating in Lebanon, focusing on women’s issues and representation in the media. They were founded in 2013. More information on the organization can be found on their website: <https://www.fe-male.org/who-we-are>. (Accessed March 1, 2021).

⁷³ More of *KAFA*’s work in Lebanon, specifically concerning domestic violence will be discussed in the next chapter. *KAFA* is a secular, women’s rights NGO in Lebanon that was founded in 2005 that focuses on issues relating to violence against women. More information on the organization can be found on their website: <https://kafa.org.lb/en/about>.

responsibility takes up a lot of their time (*Al-Jazeera* 2018). And so, the 2017 quota debate – like the 1998 debate over optional civil marriage – went nowhere. Lebanon has not incorporated any form of gender quota in its electoral laws.

Whether a quota is implemented or not, the cumulative effect of these low rates of female participation is that women are still largely excluded from decision-making in Lebanon. These powers remain largely in the hands of male politicians who (as we have noted earlier) have demonstrated their willingness to maintain forms of gendered inequality to preserve the status-quo. While it is likely true, as some of my participants noted, that ‘not all women are feminists’ and would advocate for women’s rights if elected, the fact that Parliament is largely closed off to women remains significant because it works to reinforce the operation of patriarchy in Lebanon.

vi. *Shway, Shway... Little by Little – A Recent Example*

Throughout this chapter thus far, we have briefly explored women’s activism in Lebanon and discussed a number of the obstacles that impede activist calls for greater gender equality, namely religious and political opposition. Such opposition is, indeed, significant and should not be downplayed. It has also, importantly, not completely discouraged activists. In fact, inspired by the ‘small steps’ strategy of advocated by Lebanese feminist Laure Moghaizel, activists have continued fighting for gender rights in Lebanon along these lines. This inspiration was articulated clearly to me by activist Roula Masri (2017) of *ABAAD* during our conversation:

[W]e have not been holding banners asking to topple the religious system, asking to separate sects from government. By doing so, we will get nowhere. We are not proactive that way. We can ask to get rid of the religious system, but let’s not break the whole strand of beads in one shot. Let’s take it one bead at a time. Let’s look at what we can fix bit by bit...

Masri's insights are significant. She recognizes that threats to alter the operation of Lebanon's political/religious system are likely to go "nowhere." Indeed, such was the result in 1998 in relation to the proposition of civil marriage, for example. Instead, she proposes fixing problems "bit by bit." Such a strategy, further, is less likely to spark the ire of religious officials.

To be sure, it is this same sort of pragmatism that (in part) not only allowed Laure Moghaizel to achieve a number of important gains for women (mentioned above), but also assisted the later generations of activists she inspired, namely within the country's highly discriminatory penal code. The penal code, along with nationality and personal status codes, my reader will recall, were Lebanon's significant reservations to CEDAW. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2017, I was fortunate to witness an important (and targeted) activist campaign that achieved an important gain for women in Lebanon: *ABAAD*'s campaign to have Article 522 removed from the country's penal code.

A legal artefact from the 1940s, Article 522 allowed for the exoneration of a (man) accused of rape, kidnapping, or statutory rape if he were to legally marry his victim.⁷⁴ To be sure, the logic informing the creation of a law like Article 522 fits neatly within the patriarchal norms that characterize not only Lebanese state and society, but Arab society broadly. Understanding that male (and familial) honor is bound up in women's sexuality, the encouragement of marriages to conceal 'dishonorable' or 'shameful' events (like a rape, for example) makes sense. This explanation, of course, does nothing to address the serious forms of psychological (and continued physical) harm such an arrangement stands to inflict on the victim.

⁷⁴Article 522 includes the 'crimes already mentioned' in Chapter 7 of the Penal Code that pertain to 'offenses against honor': rape, kidnapping, seduction, indecency, and the violation of women's private spaces. Further, this information was taken from *ABAAD*'s official website. The information can be found here: <https://www.abaadmena.org/programmes/advocacy-and-policy-development/project-58748b6fa56f85-59472059>. (Accessed March 1, 2021).

Unsurprisingly given the law's specificity, *ABAAD*'s initial research into Article 522 revealed that 97 percent of Lebanese had no knowledge of/were uncertain about the law.⁷⁵ Having discovered that many in Lebanon had no idea of the law, *ABAAD* began by spreading the word online. They began by releasing a video clip on social networking sites – *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram*. First posted on the 29th of November, the video had been viewed more than three million times in just several days (Domat 2016). In the video, an injured woman is being wrapped up in medical bandages until they come to resemble a wedding gown – as a powerfully chilling beat plays in the background. At the end of the video, the woman is shown screaming in silence as the words, “A white dress doesn’t cover rape” are shown across the screen.⁷⁶ The video was spread online using the hashtag #undress522. In addition to the online campaign, *ABAAD* also brought their viral video to life outside the Lebanese Parliament in downtown Beirut in December 2016. A group of women wearing wedding dresses and bandages stained with red paint (to resemble blood) stood outside the building under a banner that read ‘A White Dress Doesn’t Cover Rape.’⁷⁷ Continuing their ‘shock and awe’ activism, *ABAAD* strung up 31 wedding dresses with nooses on Beirut’s Corniche (seaside promenade) in April of 2017. Each dress represented a day in a month in which women could be subject to further abuse and violence (McKernan 2017).

After nearly a year of hard work, the campaign was successful. Lebanese Parliament repealed the law on August 16, 2017. And the activists deserve much praise for their

⁷⁵ The full text of *ABAAD*'s survey and its results can be found here:

<https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1557392910.pdf>. (Accessed March 3, 2021).

⁷⁶ The video can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-gKu9yw6eI>. (Accessed March 3, 2021).

⁷⁷ See, for example, this video of the day posted by the *Associated Press* on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaYqXD0cD9M>. (Accessed March 8, 2021).

determination, creativity, and bravery. But – what contributed to its success? I believe that there are two related contributing factors explaining the campaign’s success.

The first is related to the scope of the campaign. *ABAAD* identified the problems associated with Article 522 and asked for its erasure from the penal code. In doing so, their claims were not as ‘politicized’ as, for example, reform to nationality or personal status have been in Lebanon. If they were, their campaign would have met the same unfortunate end and would have been squashed by religious/political officials. Religious officials, in fact, have even praised the *ABAAD* campaign. One Sunni judge (Anonymous 2017), for example, explained to me that they were trying “to correct what was wrong and they were trying to get rid of it slowly.” The removal of Article 522, in other words, was a “small step,” a reasonable change that did not really appear to challenge existing authority structures but worked within them.

The second factor, I believe, is the remarkable creativity of its organizers. Noting that *ABAAD* understood the Lebanese context and adopted an appropriate strategy, I believe, does not fully capture their creativity. They sought to harness and deploy the power of social media to raise awareness about a virtually unknown law. That their viral video acquired more than three million views in several days is, indeed, no small feat. The use of social media also allowed *ABAAD* to take its campaign beyond the streets of Beirut and beyond Lebanon’s borders. Their online activism garnered worldwide attention, as global news agencies spread ghostly images of torn and bloodied wedding gowns. This international attention worked to place additional pressure on politicians to remove the law. Put differently, *ABAAD* took a piece of Lebanon’s dirty laundry, a paint-splattered wedding dress, and hung it up for the entire world to see.

The campaign against Article 522, therefore, is not only a testament to the important legacy of Laure Moghaizel but is also suggestive of the creativity of activists. Understanding the

rigidity of the country's religious/political system, they have developed strategies to achieve practical goals by working within it. More recently, they have also sought to use the power of social media to assist in the achievement of these goals.

Social Media and Gender Activism

Social media – as cliché as it may be to say in 2021 – has had a profound impact on forms of activism and various struggles to achieve forms of political or social change. Social media websites, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and even *YouTube* have created new venues for activism and for the expression of alternative political and social viewpoints. Baer (2016, 18) writes: “Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge.” These platforms, moreover, also exist largely above governmental control (important in regions where forms of censorship may limit more traditional communication).

With regards to gender activism in the Arab Middle East, Stephan (2007, 62) observes that “Arab feminists have taken their activism to the safety of the internet in order to be safeguarded from unfavorable governmental restrictions, oppressive patriarchal systems, and rigid religious practices in the Arab world.” Lebanese activist Alia Awada (2017) also explained this point to me. The internet is, she observed, “the only space that you can really tell people about your values, about your ideas, and whatever else...” As she reflected on the role of the internet for gender activism, she also suggested that the internet might be even more important to feminists in other Arab countries: “Let's talk about Egypt. Women cannot go to open spaces and talk a lot about feminism or about women's rights... because of sexual harassment. [...]. So, they only have the online platforms to express themselves.”

Recent observations about the Lebanese context also suggest that social media has shaped post-2005 activism (following Syria formal withdrawal from Lebanon) in several important (and related) ways (Abou Habib 2020; Stephan 2014). First, feminists and activists have increasingly made use of the internet and social media to discuss and raise awareness of issues that are still largely taboo in Lebanon and the Middle East, such as homosexuality and concerns for bodily autonomy. (Importantly, we will revisit these in the coming chapter with more detail.) Second, this technological fluency and concern for taboo issues highlight the coming-of-age of a new generation of feminists. As one of my participants delicately phrased this: “[W]e find ourselves more aligned with the newer feminist organizations.” And third, social media has made for the easier dissemination of information and recruitment of supporters. Networks of activists can more easily extend beyond face-to-face relations and even beyond Lebanon’s borders, allowing activists and feminists to communicate more easily with counterparts in other parts of the world. As Masri (2017) observed during our conversation: “*Twitter* and all those other mediums broke down barriers – So politics, you can now see it directly. [...]. We can connect easier.” Indeed, this ease of connection was certainly demonstrated by *ABAAD*’s campaign to remove Article 522 from the Lebanese penal code. As noted above, their creative use of social media through the deployment of clever hashtags and the circulation of an emotionally charged video worked to transform a relatively unknown piece of legislation from the Lebanese penal code into international news.

Pop Music, Awareness, and Social Media

Popular music and efforts to promote forms of social and political change have a long, complicated history in the Arab world. Of all the artistic genres used by Arab peoples to articulate feelings of hope, joy, or despair, music has been the most common, likely because it

can reach the greatest number of people. It is also capable of evoking those same feelings in those who listen. These uniquely *affective* qualities likely explain why it has found itself attached to various emotionally charged socio-political phenomena across the Arab world for generations.

Indeed, recent scholarship examining the 2011 Egyptian uprising, for example, argues that popular music was at “the heart” of the ongoing uprising, as popular musicians began to “articulate, critique, and voice their perceptions, artistically and creatively, of the changes taking place in a transforming society” (Valasspopoulos and Mostafa 2014, 638-9; see also Sprengel 2019). In Tunisia, too, popular music has played an instrumental role in the expression of anti-regime sentiments during the uprising against Ben-Ali’s regime in 2011. Musicians produced songs articulating the harsh political realities of the regime’s penchant for unbridled corruption, injustice, and police brutality (Gana 2013, 216). Popular music has also been a site for the expression of the liberatory goals at the centre of the Palestinian struggle since the *Nakba* (catastrophe or disaster in Arabic) in 1948 (Massad 2005, 177). It has also, more recently, given diaspora Palestinian youth a venue for the expression of their feelings of loss, disconnectedness, and frustration over a homeland they may never know (Drury 2017).

Popular music also found its way into the Lebanese Civil War. Music was used to emphasize the divisions amongst the Lebanese, but also their unity. Radios were a staple in shelters and homes as people sought to drown out the sounds of shelling and bombs. Each militia/faction operated its own radio stations, using them to disperse their political messaging, including through songs (Fisk 2002, 145-6). Factions produced songs glorifying their military efforts, political leaders, and their unique vision of what Lebanon ought to become (Burkhalter 2013, 173; 2011, 57-61). These partisan sounds, however, were – at times – drowned out by Fairouz’s pacifying voice. While large public concerts were not really held during the War,

Fairouz still released a number of songs expressing hope and love for a unified, peaceful Lebanon.⁷⁸ Her decision to remain in Lebanon for the duration of the War, too, transformed her into a “symbol for peace for Lebanese from all the different confessions” and her songs were admired by Lebanese of different faiths (Burkhalter 2013, 184). Importantly, popular music – as we shall see later – also found its way into the 2019 Lebanese uprisings.

In each example above, however, music’s involvement only mattered to the extent that it could secure an audience. If no one is there to listen to messages about unity or corruption or anything else – no matter how beautiful or important they may be – why should we care? This is the observation made by John Street (2003) when he notes that the “power of music” lies in its (and the musicians who produce it) ability to secure an audience. Musicians, he notes, can only be ‘truth bearers’ insofar as they can find people to listen to them (2003, 128). And here we can begin to understand the connections between music and technology. It is music’s relationship with communicative technologies that allows it to reach the greatest number of people. From the radio in previous decades to streaming and social media websites of today, music is always looking for new and creative ways to command a following.

Further, given that the Arab pop genre I am interested in here largely owes its existence to developments in communicative technologies – namely satellite television – it should not be surprising that its celebrities were also quick to jump online as a means of expanding their audience base. Indeed, a number of the Arab pop celebrities discussed throughout this work have operated social media accounts – on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, etc. – for the better part of a

⁷⁸ *Bihabbak Ya Lubnan (I Love You, Oh Lebanon)*, for example, was released in 1976. It can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-tadEnFTWM>. (Accessed March 12, 2021). *Hawwa Beyrouth (The Love of Beirut)*, as another example, was released in 1979. It can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w60nlRPuqjU>. (Accessed March 12, 2021).

decade.⁷⁹ For these starlets, social media – just as it has for the activists and feminists discussed above – allowed them to expand their reach/connections to their audiences, further amplifying their voice, extending it beyond the 24/7 pop satellite television stations of the 1990s. But while activists may only occasionally ‘go viral’ like *ABAAD*’s campaign against Article 522, nearly everything a celebrity posts online is exposed to a large audience because they have amassed followings in the tens of millions – across multiple platforms. This point is not lost on activists, as Alia Awada (2017) explained to me:

Most of Elissa’s fans will not go to *Save the Children*’s *Twitter*, but they will check what Elissa is doing. So, let’s say Elissa is their ambassador, and she’s putting all this information about *Save the Children* and how Syrian refugee children have the right to education, etc., etc. They will take this message, they will spread it, they will check more... they will be educated on this topic.

Awada’s insights suggest that by lending their voice (or their audience) to an issue or cause celebrities can raise awareness about it. Her insights are not without warrant, and I believe another recent example – also involving Elissa – is demonstrative of this point.

In 2018, Elissa released a video clip detailing her personal struggle with breast cancer.⁸⁰ The clip begins with the starlet speaking candidly about her illness and the fear she felt after her diagnosis, explaining that she worried about the impact it would have on her loved ones. The clip shows images of the diva undergoing treatment with medical devices, speaking with physicians, and laying in a hospital bed. The final scene of the clip urges viewers – in Arabic and in English – to stop ignoring breast cancer because early detection can save lives.

⁷⁹ *Twitter* is useful here because user profiles include the month and year of the profile’s creation. Elissa, for example, has been on *Twitter* since April 2011.

⁸⁰ The song, *Ila Kol Elli Bihebbouni (For All Those Who Love Me)*, can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYqd7qPNTm0>. (Accessed March 14, 2021).

The video quickly spread like wildfire across the internet, amassing more than nine million views on *YouTube* in less than a week (Buchanan 2018). *Twitter* was not only flooded with support for Elissa, but with numerous users claiming that Elissa had inspired them to go see their physicians for breast cancer screenings as well. Even medical professionals praised the songstress for raising awareness about an oft ignored and “taboo” issue in the region, explaining that women often avoid screenings for breast cancer, thinking that a positive diagnosis would mean losing their breasts (likely through mastectomies) and make them feel ‘less feminine’ (Reuters 2018).

As this example demonstrates, pop music and its creative use of its massive audience (through social media) can promote social change by spreading awareness and disseminating information – a point we will explore more in coming chapters. However, in making this claim, as noted in the introduction to this work, I endeavor to remain mindful of Lebanon’s politics – discussed earlier in this chapter – and the difficulties associated with efforts to achieve dramatic or structural political change in Lebanon.

Conclusion

Finding inspiration in my experiences at the Lebanese embassy in Ottawa prior to departing for my fieldwork, my goal in this chapter was to offer my reader more context on the gendered workings of Lebanese politics. The chapter began with an overview of early feminist activist efforts to secure suffrage for women. I then seek to explain the formation of Lebanon’s personal status codes and nationality law, paying attention to the importance of kinship ties for Arab cultures. In the second section of this chapter, I sought to offer my reader a brief overview of the gendered dynamics of post-war Lebanon, explaining how the Lebanese state and religious officials have been largely resistant to forms of (gendered) political change that threatens their

authority – including reforms to personal status and nationality laws. Recognizing the importance of Laure Moghaizel’s legacy, I also discuss the case of *ABAAD*’s successful campaign to remove Article 522 from the Lebanese penal code. In the final section of this chapter, I endeavour to highlight the important role of social media for activism efforts. I sought to connect this discussion to pop music, noting that the genre’s use of social media allows its celebrities to efficiently raise awareness about issues and causes. In the coming chapter, we will explore this process in greater detail.

I think... the singers... we should listen to their voice, not their political views...Everybody should do what he is... what he excels in. If I go to sing, I think people would be... it would be a disaster. But I do what I do. I am a surgeon and now the Minister of Culture. I do what I do to the best of my knowledge. And I think this is my subspecialty. And I think whatever these singers say on their social media or about their private lives is none of our interest.

– Dr. Ghattas Khoury (2017),
Former Lebanese Minister of Culture

Chapter Four: Political Pop

Introduction

I was recently chatting casually with a close friend and fellow PhD student in my department. As we both joked and poked fun at our discipline and the mental strain involved in dissertation writing, I told her that my project’s saving grace was that my methodology let me fill up pages by ‘talking about myself.’ Though I was being facetious in an (unsuccessful) effort to make what is actually a massive intellectual undertaking seem even just a little bit less terrifying,

she told me that she thought my project seemed to be more than that. “Mine is on the European Union,” she said, “You could write it if you wanted. But I couldn’t write yours. It’s about you trying to understand yourself.”

I have always known that my choice of doctoral project was inspired by my childhood interest in Arab and Lebanese popular culture. And, beyond ‘trying to understand myself,’ I chose to deploy reflexivity as a methodological tool to not only address practical questions and concerns regarding my ethnic heritage, possible biases, and explain how I secured *wastas* that granted me access to a number of interviewees. What I never stopped to consider, however, was that maybe my fascination with Lebanese popular culture and pop music was not simply because I liked bright colors, dancing, and upbeat tempos. Maybe part of its appeal was that I could watch people with physical features that (somewhat) resembled my own, singing in a language I had heard all my life, showing me another image (however inaccurate, sensationalized, or manufactured) of Lebanese-Arab womanhood – in addition to those made visible to me through my female family members. Perhaps it was my younger self attempting to expand my mental image of what Lebanese women were like.

While this line of quasi-existential thought helped me better understand why I chose to dedicate entire years of my life to this intellectual pursuit, it also raises a more significant (and perhaps obvious) question: what is Arab pop actually selling? How do pop stars (and the industry they participate in) construct and display femininity and engage with political issues in Lebanon? And more importantly, how is this received and understood by the Lebanese? This chapter will, therefore, explore these questions in greater detail. But I also ask my reader to remain mindful of the discussion from the previous chapter, examining the complicated role of gender in Lebanon and in Lebanese socio-political life, broadly. In order to better examine the political dimensions

of Arab pop's articulations of femininity, I thought it was important to also explore the political contexts in which it is produced. Indeed, as scholars of popular culture argue, a give and take relationship exists between popular culture and the socio-political contexts in which it is produced. Socio-political issues often compel artists to focus on certain issues – race, class, gender, etc. – and their artistic outputs can, in turn, influence socio-political conditions (Shea 1999, 6-7).

This chapter begins with a discussion of criticisms of Arab pop that characterize the genre as almost entirely apolitical. I argue that such criticisms fail to consider a number of important instances in which the genre and its stars directly engage with very serious political issues, such as sectarianism, women's participation in formal politics, domestic violence, and even LGBTQ+ rights. I also argue that while some pop stars have directly avoided engaging in political debates, the public identities that they meticulously construct for themselves are, in fact, highly politicized and contested.

Popping an Apolitical Bubble

Recalling the discussion in the introduction to this thesis, the current era of Arab Middle Eastern pop music could not have come to life without fairly recent technological developments in mass media and communication. Just as the advent of both radio and audio cassettes changed Arab musical culture in the decades prior, the mass proliferation of satellite dishes in the 1990s, too, would seriously alter the operation of Arab pop music. Television allowed for the unification of both auditory and visual forms of communication. Viewers across the region were able to consume visual and auditory information simultaneously for the first time. This coming-together of senses gave rise to what is now the central feature of modern Arab pop music, the *fidyuklib* (video clip or music video). Video clips delivered primarily through a number of large, 24/7 free-

to-air satellite music channels (such as *Rotana*, *Mazzika*, *Melody*, and *Nessma*) invited Arab pop directly into the homes of millions of people around the Middle East, allowing for a dissemination that far exceeded anything possible with the cassette tapes of previous decades.

The changes brought about by satellite culture would be amplified with the rise of internet and mobile technologies, namely cellular phones, streaming websites (i.e. *YouTube*), and social media platforms (*Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*). Pop music and its celebrities could not only be accessed 24/7 on televisions, but now they could be everywhere else too as consumers could *literally* carry them in their pockets. For example, Najwa Karam – the Lebanese pop music celebrity - could not only exist in her music videos on the *Rotana* network, but on *Twitter* as she expresses her personal opinions, on *Facebook* as she engages with her fan pages, and on *Instagram* as she posts images that offer fans glimpses into her private (and ultra-glamorous) life.

Expectedly, this era of omnipresent mass-mediated music has been the subject of much debate and criticism. Most of the criticism, as noted earlier, has focused specifically on the video clip. One of the central criticisms is that video clips (and the songs they feature) are almost entirely *apolitical*. They rarely address political issues, and most songs are about the various facets of love. Given that (Arab) pop is a multi-million-dollar regional industry, designed to achieve maximum financial success, the clear avoidance of controversial political issues seems understandable. Ruffling political feathers by directly focusing on domestic or regional socio-political issues would be, commonsensically, bad for business (Hammond 2007, 160). Consequently, critics argue that this large-scale avoidance of ethical, societal, or even national concerns has turned pop music into a machine whose lyrics, music, and images cooperate to promote limitless and blind consumerism (El Messiri 2010, 169). Video clips are often not set in

any distinguishable Arab country; singers and dancers are often blonde, fair-skinned, and have blue or green colored eyes (all uncommon traits in the Arab world); and are often (sometimes even problematically) dressed in foreign fashions, such as the feathered headdresses traditionally worn by some North American indigenous groups⁸¹ or even *saris*, the traditional female dress worn by some groups in South Asia. Critics argue that geographic and cultural *dislocation* compounds the apolitical nature of Arab pop because it serves to weaken consumers' sense of national or cultural belonging. As Palestinian social commentator Tamim al-Barghouti (2010, 229) observes:

[Video clips] make men and women desire fancy mansions, it attempts to depoliticize their minds, and prevents them from asking questions about their misery and impotence. A teenager watching an entertainment channel instead of a news channel will not make a connection between the Iraqi death shown on the news channel and the Arab version of the American MTV culture produced by the entertainment channel.

So, if as critics argue, Arab pop is not selling politics or inspiring political awareness amongst its audience, what is it doing? The genre has been accused of *selling sex*.⁸² “The video clip is an art form that revolves around sex” (Armbrust 2010, 232). Gilman (2014, 81) also notes that “the physical desirability of a female singer is now paramount, and vocal talent can appear as an afterthought.” Similarly, during our conversation on popular music, Shiekh Mohammad Al-Ladan made a similar observation: “Now in video clips the revealing images and the moves of the singer take away from the song and its words. All to target the sexuality in men and [are] spoiling society and humanity in general. They take away the humanity from humans” (2017).

⁸¹ Lebanese singer Maya Diab, for example, posted a photo of herself on *Twitter* wearing such a headdress in February 2019 telling her fans that she “went native Indian” in Mexico and experienced “their energy with all its rawness.” The *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1097154512043806720> (Accessed August 20, 2019).

⁸² Importantly, with regards to Arab pop's ‘selling of sex,’ it has been noted that these debates speak to issues of American cultural imperialism, noting that Arab pop ‘apes’ American pop (Hammond 2007, 159). Other scholars have also examined questions relating to cultural authenticity (Gilman 2014) and even contemporary music's connection to neoliberalism and global capitalism, according to Timothy Taylor (2016). And, relatedly, capitalism's complicated relationship with women's bodies is also well documented (Penny 2011).

Given that Al-Ladan is a Sunni *imam*, his views on sexuality are understandable. In Islam (and Arab societies broadly), almost no sanction for sex outside the confines of (heterosexual) marriage exists (especially for women and girls). Mindful of this, the fact that the genre is subject to these sorts of criticisms, too, becomes easier to understand. Video clips and their scantily clad singers and dancers with their provocative movements and insinuations all cooperate to ‘rub salt in a particularly sore spot.’

To be sure, the issue of selling sex came up a number of times during my fieldwork and during conversations with my interviewees. Interestingly, during these conversations, two Lebanese pop starlets in particular were mentioned by my participants by name: Haifa Wehbe and Myriam Klink.

Haifa Wehbe

Lebanese pop music star Haifa Wehbe is not only one of the most famous artists in the region with fans across the Arab Middle East, she is also no stranger to controversy. Wehbe has frustrated more conservative authorities – religious and governmental – around the Middle East numerous times. In 2008, for example, the songstress was slated to perform at a sold-out concert in Manama, Bahrain. Despite the assurances of concert organizers that Wehbe would dress “modestly” to avoid upsetting the Kingdom’s ‘Islamic conventions,’ Parliament voted to cancel the concert. One Member of Parliament defended the ban, arguing that Wehbe was a “sexual singer who spoke with her body, not her voice” (quoted in Harrison 2008). At the urging of her fans and a renewed promise from organizers that she would be dressed modestly, Wehbe was eventually permitted to sing. Describing her outfit after the event, one concertgoer noted: “Haifa Wehbe was dressed modestly. She was almost veiled” (quoted in *Daily Star* 2008).

Wehbe stirred up controversy again in 2014 for her performance in Egypt. She had been invited to perform during a live episode of *Star Academy*, an Arabic-language television singing competition comparable to *American Idol*. The diva stepped on stage wearing a figure-hugging *Zuhair Murad*⁸³ black dress with sheer panels that exposed most of her hips and rear. Her choice of dress was blamed for ‘shocking the Arab world’ (BBC 2014). Debate erupted on social media websites, *Twitter* and *YouTube*, after recordings of the performance were uploaded. Critical posts on social media called the dress “scandalous,” accusing Wehbe of “crossing a line” (BBC 2014). Responding to public outcry, the Egyptian satellite network *CBC*, which had originally aired the performance, issued a formal apology to their viewers.

Wehbe was accused of ‘crossing lines’ again in 2017. After a live performance at the American University of Cairo, the starlet’s shorts offended some members of the audience. Though they were arguably less revealing than her *Zuhair Murad* dress that ‘shocked’ the entire region, the diva’s olive-green short-shorts still managed to cause upset. Turning to social media to respond to her detractors, Wehbe asked if it were just ‘deliberate to criticize her after every one of her successful performances in Egypt’ or if it were that her ‘civilized [i.e., modern] look’ [i.e., her shorts] was just that strange to people?’⁸⁴

Wehbe’s numerous wardrobe scandals over the years have earned her a reputation in Middle Eastern popular culture. She is known for being an artist unafraid to embrace sexuality openly, often displayed through her choice of clothing. Even a quick scroll through her official *Instagram* page confirms this assessment. In many photos, Wehbe looks seductively into the

⁸³ It is perhaps worth mentioning that Zuhair Murad, in addition to being a world-famous fashion designer whose clothes have been worn by numerous international celebrities (Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez, Shakira, and others), is also Lebanese. So, Wehbe’s dress that ‘shocked the Arab world’ was, interestingly, also a product of it. Adding to its *Arabness*, the design house also maintains one of its three corporate offices in downtown Beirut (the others are in Paris, France and Stabio, Switzerland).

⁸⁴ The original *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/HaifaWehbe/status/925805892171452416> (Accessed September 10, 2019).

camera, while posed suggestively (leaning backwards, arched back, etc.) The sex is impossible to miss. And, understandably – given her fame, popularity, and reputation – her name came up during my interviews.

Minister for Women’s Affairs, Jean Ogasapian (2017), for example, mentioned her specifically in his comments about video clips:

Haifa Wehbe [...] no one looks at her for her voice. My voice is nicer than hers. Her body is nice and she has movements and whatnot. There are a lot of singers in Lebanon who make these clips, but there’s no sound. There’s a type of them that really just expose the body and people look and watch. Some of them have really bad videos, but they make the video in a way that makes people forget the sound.

The Minister’s comments offer a somewhat dismissive attitude towards Wehbe. Saying that ‘no one looks at her for her voice’ forgets an important point: people are *still* looking at her. She is grabbing attention. And, by virtue of that, cannot be dismissed as a silly sex symbol. If anything, her sex symbol status is the very reason we cannot dismiss her. To do so, I maintain, would risk missing a number of significant instances where popular music/popular culture affixes itself to contemporary socio-political issues.

This point, I believe, is best demonstrated with an example.

On one hand, Wehbe is the controversial pop diva with risqué clothing choices, upsetting religious and governmental authorities across the region. On the other, she is actually a vocal supporter of (predominately) Shia politico-military organization, *Hezbollah*. Following the July 2006 conflict between Israel and *Hezbollah*, Wehbe was very vocal about her support for the militant organization and its controversial leader, Hassan Nasrallah. “It’s a land that has people to defend it... and therefore Nasrallah had a big role... in defending Lebanon’s honor and border. [...] There’s no war that starts with no reason. The one who begins it is the aggressor and

I don't think we started it," Wehbe told journalists in 2006 (quoted in Hirst 2006; see also: Bayoumy 2007). Several years later, during a 2009 television interview, Wehbe was asked to 'name an individual for whom her heart beats but not as a lover.' Wehbe paused for a moment and replied:

Frankly... and the war possibly made me more certain of this, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah. His very high wisdom. His dignified way of dealing with all the situations that were bloody and still are. The thing that I like most about him is this charisma in his speaking, this strong way of speaking that convinces me. He is very convincing and wise. His wisdom is very... and of course he is a model man...⁸⁵

While the idea of a pop starlet, so often criticized for disrespecting Islamic ideas of propriety with her risqué movements and short skirts supporting a highly controversial Islamist para-military organization may seem ironic, the answer likely stems from her own life experiences. As short as her skirts may be, Haifa Wehbe still identifies as a Shia Muslim. She was born in the village of Mahrouna, located in Southern Lebanon. Demographically, Southern Lebanon is primarily Shia. It is also the birthplace of *Hezbollah* in the 1980s (Norton 2007). Wehbe also had a brother who died in the 1980s opposing Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (Bayoumy 2007).

Wehbe's support for *Hezbollah* is significant. First, I believe it serves to humanize her. Wehbe is more than an easily dismissed sex symbol. She presents another side of her identity. She is also a Lebanese citizen with thoughts and opinions on her country's political climate and political parties. Second, in expressing those thoughts and opinions, Wehbe seems to be positioning herself and her views within the country's sectarian system. As a Shia Muslim from the South of Lebanon, she supports a Shia para-military organization from the South of Lebanon.

⁸⁵ Video footage of the interview can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzl3FoyvAPA>. (Accessed September 10, 2019).

To this end, as much as Wehbe may push gender boundaries with her revealing outfits, her views on politics seem to be limited by the boundaries of Lebanon's sectarian system. In this way, her very vocal support for *Hezbollah* reinforces those divides between Sunnis, Christians, Druze, and Shias that have long colored the landscape.

What I interpret as sectarian support for *Hezbollah* can also, I believe, help explain how Wehbe managed to 're-tell' the story of *Hezbollah* and its 2006 conflict with Israel. Wehbe tells a story of *Hezbollah* defending Lebanon's honor and border from (what appears to be) unprovoked Israeli aggression. But the conflict, as is now well-known, began when *Hezbollah* 'started it' with their acts of aggression. It was *Hezbollah*, on July 12, 2006, that led a cross-border raid into Israeli territory. During the raid, the group abducted two Israeli soldiers, bringing them back across the border into Lebanese territory (Myre and Erlanger 2006). Israel's subsequent bombing of Lebanon (whether or not it was warranted or excessive) was not unprovoked. In re-telling the story of the 2006 conflict this way, Wehbe offers *Hezbollah* – an already controversial organization in Lebanon (particularly amongst Sunnis and Christians) – some 'good press.' Rather than being presented as an aggressor in a conflict that resulted in a serious loss of life and billions of dollars in economic and property damage (*Reuters* 2007), Hassan Nasrallah and his organization are reframed as heroes, defending their homeland from unbridled Israeli hostility.

Wehbe's comments, moreover, cannot be separated from her status as a high-profile celebrity, whose interviews are heard and read by many people in Lebanon and around the Arab world. To this end, Wehbe is not simply in the business of selling sex through her music or creating tabloid fodder as she reveals her backside through sheer gowns. I argue that she is acting as a consciously sectarian actor (a Shia Muslim) trying to 'sell' her audience a polished image of

a controversial Shia paramilitary organization. Thinking this way, helps us understand how Wehbe can push boundaries in one regard, while working to reinforce and maintain others.

Myriam Klink

Myriam Klink is a Lebanese model turned singer and is no stranger to controversy. Klink has been subject to near constant criticism in the Lebanese and Arab media for her ‘over the top’ persona and her risqué wardrobe choices.

In 2012, Klink released the video for her song, *Klink Revolution*.⁸⁶ The video features Klink in a variety of revealing outfits engaging in the risqué, sexualized movements typical of Arab pop videos. She is shown wearing ‘sexy’ military fatigues – short-shorts and a midriff-revealing t-shirt – while holding a military assault rifle in each hand as she stands in a graveyard. The outfit and location were, I suspect, deliberate costuming/setting choices. Klink is presented as the ‘sexy soldier’ armed and ready to come ‘save’ Lebanon from death and decay (symbolized by the graveyard).

The song, more importantly, is a critique of the current political realities in Lebanon – a number of which have already been discussed/mentioned. “I am the Klink. [...] I want to talk about what’s going on. [...]. Burning tires, broken roads, [...] and personal status laws. Weapons are everywhere. You’re breaking Lebanon,” she sings. “Where are you from, who was your father, give me the details [...],” she continues. In approximately four minutes (and wardrobe choices aside), Klink manages to astutely summarize many of the failings of the Lebanese state, all of which are (the video suggests) responsible for bringing about Lebanon’s death and decay. Not only is she critical of the state for failing to provide basic infrastructure – ‘broken roads’ – but she is also critical of the legal/religious establishment, singling out the personal status codes

⁸⁶ The video for *Klink Revolution* can be found on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ofuTrawbjE. (Accessed October 5, 2020).

as an important example of oppression. Significantly, when she rhetorically asks, ‘where are you from’ and ‘who was your father,’ Klink is directly criticizing Lebanon’s patriarchal kinship structure, whereby citizenship (and even political offices) are inherited along the father’s bloodline (as we discussed earlier in chapter three). Understandably, the video was subject to much criticism, not only for her clothing choices, but for disrespecting the dead by choosing to film in a cemetery (*AlBawaba* 2012).

In fall 2016, as Lebanese parliamentarians were casting ballots for President, one anonymous parliamentarian clearly disapproved of [his] ‘legitimate’ options and cast a ballot for Myriam Klink. As the ballot was read aloud in parliament, laughter and cheers erupted amongst officials. In the background, one official could be heard (off camera) asking who she is, and another responds, ‘that woman who sings and dances and takes off her clothes.’ The camera pans back to the group of (older) men tallying votes, including Speaker Nabih Berri, and shows them laughing.⁸⁷ The stunt was picked up by Lebanese media and became something of a national joke in the days following the election. Lebanese news station *Al-Jadeed*, for example, went out to the streets of Beirut to get an assessment of the popular opinion.⁸⁸ The journalist showed a variety of people images of Klink (in suggestive poses/clothing) and asked if they knew who she was. Many of the responses were silly: “I don’t know who she is,” said one man, “But I’d like to take her home with me.” Another asked if she were “Trump’s wife.” Some responses were kind of harsh/judgmental, with respondents noting that she should be appointed the “Minister of whiskey and lingerie,” while others lamented that the Lebanese have “reached this point.” A number of people, too, used somewhat crude language in their responses – referring to her as a *slut*, etc.

⁸⁷ Footage of the vote tallying in Parliament can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSb97_kPv-w. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

⁸⁸ The video can be found here and was featured in *Al-Jadeed*’s interview with the starlet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBXZLhcXU8A&t=3323s>. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

In a 2016 interview with *Al-Jadeed* host Tony Khalife on the program *Eye-To-Eye*, Klink was also asked to respond to the comment made by the Parliamentarian off camera, describing her as a woman who ‘takes off her clothes.’ Klink responds: “Takes off her clothes. What? See what you’ve done with the country before talking about me taking off my clothes. Second, [...] he did not have the right to say that in the Parliament.” Khalife asks a follow up question and asks what an appropriate way to describe Myriam Klink would be (since she objected to being described as a woman who ‘takes off her clothes’). She replies: “I do not take off my clothes. I am a supermodel and it is known by all people that models wear swimsuits and lingerie. Let’s finish this. Come on. Wake up, guys. [...]. Stop being so obsessed with the body. [...]. Come on, live. There are things that are more important in life than a woman and her body.”⁸⁹ Importantly, a Lebanese woman’s rights activist was also invited to appear on the program alongside Klink. Significantly, she praised Klink, juxtaposing her against the actions and comments of other prominent Lebanese celebrities, like Najwa Karam who defended domestic violence.

In spring 2017, shortly after her ‘15 minutes of increased fame’ following the election, Klink released the video clip for her song (featuring Jad Khalife), *Goal*.⁹⁰ “You scored the goal. You put it in me and you filled it up,” Klink sings. While the song is literally about scoring a goal in soccer and does not actually use any inappropriate language, the video (combined with Klink’s emphatic ‘ohhs’ and ‘ahhs’ throughout the song) clarifies the song’s intended meaning. The majority of the video shows Klink (in lingerie) rolling around in bed with Khalife, even in very intimate embraces.

⁸⁹ Klink’s interview can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBXZLhcxU8A&t=3323s>. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

⁹⁰ The entire *Goal* video clip can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfpeT_azFr8. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

The clip caused such a stir in Lebanon, that (then) Ministers of Information (Melhem Riachy) and Justice (Salim Jriessati) met to discuss the video's impact on Lebanon. Following the meeting, it was announced that the video would be banned on Lebanese television because it was too provocative (*Daily Star* 2017). Concerns were also raised about the presence of a young girl shown jumping on a bed with Klink in the video and whether or not this constituted child exploitation (Lemon 2017).

After the ban, many Lebanese took to *Twitter* to respond and offer their two cents on the ban, Klink, and the video. One *Twitter* user, for example, posted: "No electricity, no water, bad roads, VAT [value added tax on purchases] increased to 11%. Lebanese people: it's ok. Myriam Klink: GOAL FAWATT EL GOAL. LP [Lebanese People]: THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS."⁹¹ Another user referred to the Goal video as a "new low in Lebanese cultural trash."⁹² Some users, rather than mocking the song or the supposed priorities of the 'Lebanese people,' encouraged others to stop sharing the video and discussing Klink's antics. "Why is Myriam Klink trending? We are helping her to share what she is doing honestly," posted one user.⁹³ "All the outrage over that horrible Myriam Klink video is giving her free publicity. Well done," wrote another user.⁹⁴

With Klink's status as has a highly publicized (and somewhat scandalous) person, it was unsurprising when my interviewees singled her out by name during our conversations. Sunni Shiekh Mohammad Al-Ladan, for example, held Klink and her ilk (at least partly) responsible for the presence of wickedness in society:

⁹¹ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/RamziH91/status/842288613392015360>. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

⁹² The *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/eliefares/status/838029284681842688>. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

⁹³ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/julienkhoury/status/838022105371410432>. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

⁹⁴ The *tweet* can be found here: https://twitter.com/Lara_alassaad/status/838031725406130179. (Accessed September 13, 2019).

Music encourages vice and forbidden acts. If the song's subject is about nationalism, patriotism, or has religious themes, then it would not encourage those things. Some songs do not respect values. Like the videos of Myriam Klink. *Allah* and religion push us to love our country, virtue, good manners, decency, and goodness. Their songs call for forbidden acts. Women say that 'I am free to do what I want with my body, even marry my brother if I want.' *Allah* says these are all forbidden. If the images in the video are revealing [i.e. feature women/men in little clothing], they definitely lead to debauchery (2017).

While offering different justifications, feminist activists, too, found Klink's highly publicized antics to be problematic. Roula Masri of *ABAAD* explained that she felt Klink was giving the public 'mixed messages' that could do more harm than good:

Myriam Klink, when she says that 'I should do whatever I want with my body, it is my right,' she is objectifying women's image and giving people controversial messages. Giving them mixed messages that you should be liberated, but have no standards in your image. [...]. When you hear them [i.e., celebrities] talk, you feel how much we still need for them to wear glasses and see what they say. They [i.e., celebrities] might have the intention to talk this discourse about rights, but ignorance hurts... (2017).

Alia Awada of *Fe-Male* also echoed Masri's sentiments:

But it's not only her clothes, it's her attitude, everything. It's everything about Myriam Klink. It's really...and for me, it's really... like there's a tiny line between the freedom of speech and expression and the way you are addressing the public [...]. Media, for me, is the number one tool that influences the public, their ideas... and when we talk about media it's the traditional and the new digital media [...]. So, when we address the public, we have to be aware of what we are saying and the way we are addressing... we cannot go with the G-string and say, 'I'm defending women's rights.' People will not listen to you. They will only comment on your G-string or your bra or whatever. [...]. It's not really helpful for women's rights. To be a woman defending women's rights doesn't mean you go with your bikini in the streets and say that no one can do anything. You can do it, but not to defend women's rights. You can do it because you want to do it. Just don't make a link between women's rights. We do believe that every woman can control her body and wear whatever she wants, and when we talk about that we also talk about women with *hijab* and women without *hijab*, with *burka*, or whatever. She can wear what she wants as long as she is not forced to do that and as long as it is her choice. (2017).

Journalist Mariam Al-Bassam, however, seemed to be more dismissive of Klink:

Myriam Klink, I don't think she is going to be a role model for women. She is always ridiculed, and women do not always imitate what she does. She has nothing but scandals. I think women are smarter than to fall into the trap of Myriam Klink. [...] Don't count Myriam as an artist. She is a case that will shine for a while and then go away with time. [...]. If you saw Myriam Klink's *Goal* video... everybody in news media was critical of

that and they asked her what she was doing for a week, and then it was all gone. The story will go away. (2017).

And now, what are we left with? Are pop musicians – Klink and her ilk – solely to blame for the presence of anti-Islamic wickedness in society? Probably not exclusively because pop music remains only one facet of popular culture that may chafe against traditional or more conservative views. Additionally, the feminist activists, while offering a more nuanced view on the relationship between clothing and women's rights still found Klink's unique take on women's rights to be problematic. As they explained, both Masri and Awada understand that the means through which messages about women's rights are communicated can, at times, be just as important as the message itself. So, is wearing very revealing clothing while claiming to champion the rights of women the best strategy in the Lebanese context? Likely not, as Awada and Masri (and *Al-Jadeed*'s interviewees on the streets of Beirut) all point out – an observation that, I suspect, is further complicated by Lebanon's overarching patriarchal social structure. Is Klink, as Al-Bassam and several *Twitter* users point out, a case that will 'shine for a while and go away' when people stop paying attention? This could be, but again, Klink – like other pop stars – is "empowered" by her celebrity status in ways that ordinary Lebanese (men and women alike) are not. And further, Klink and the story of her 'vote for President' have now entered the Lebanese popular imagination. Indeed, as we will see in later chapters, it resurfaces when Lebanon is facing forms political upheaval. Users on *Twitter*, for example, will bring it up (even if facetiously) and joke that Lebanon "can finally have Myriam Klink as President."⁹⁵

The ridiculousness and silliness involved in some of Klink's scandals notwithstanding, she is still a very vocal critic of the Lebanese state and by *airing* those grievances in her music

⁹⁵ This *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/Nora59238397/status/1187369646846021632>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

videos, she is sharing those sentiments with millions of viewers across Lebanon and the Arab world, thereby raising awareness of them. Afterall, if she was ‘unknown,’ it would not have been her name that was read aloud in Lebanon’s parliament during a vote for the country’s next president. Even if the reading of her name was a ‘joke,’ as Minister Jarrah explained to me (2017), it was still there. That event spurred her participation in a number of roundtables and interviews with journalists and activists to discuss women’s issues and politics in Lebanon, elevating her from ‘pop starlet’ to the level of ‘political activist.’ (Not to mention, Klink was given other platforms/venues to continue spreading her disapproving views on Lebanese parliamentarians.)

It is, of course, difficult – if not impossible – to measure the extent to which Klink herself is helpful or hindrersome to the ‘women’s cause’ in Lebanon. What makes her case interesting and significant, I think, is her capacity for sparking debate and discussion. While her methodology and approach may not be ideal, as suggested by Masri and Awada, she still appears to be quite successful at securing national (and international) stages to vocalize her views on women’s issues in a political environment that – as we have seen – that has long been comfortable relegating them to the backburner.

The Apolitical Bubble: The Cases of Wehbe and Klink

Critics of pop music argue that the genre is both apolitical and too focused on the selling of sex. Images, videos, and songs all cooperate to dislocate the genre from the Arab Middle East, its political realities, and its culture. In this milieu, two artists – Wehbe and Klink – are very often criticized, sometimes even outwardly banned, for their scandalous clothing, risqué movements, and their willingness to be very open with their sexuality. Klink and Wehbe, in

short, appear to be prime examples of the sort of apolitical, hypersexualized artists that critics point to.

Wehbe and Klink may have controversially short skirts, but they also have a keen awareness of where they are and what they are doing. Both women have directly attached themselves to Lebanese politics. While Wehbe may challenge Lebanese gender norms concerning appropriate female dress, I argue that the starlet's support for *Hezbollah* reveals her self-positioning as a Shia within the country's religious divided political sphere. Myriam Klink has also been a very vocal critic of the Lebanese state, both through her music – 'Klink Revolution' – and her witty retorts on television programs as she tells parliamentarians to 'look what they've done to the country before talking about her clothing.' Critiques of Arab pop that rush to dismiss it as apolitical cultural trash focused on making money off sex, I argue, risk missing important examples of how the genre weaves itself in and around the socio-political realities of Lebanon and the Arab world.

Domestic Violence: the Lebanese Case

Accurate statistics about the prevalence of domestic violence in the Arab world are difficult to obtain. This stems not only from chronic underreporting, but also because instances of domestic violence are often handled discretely within 'the family,' or within religious courts/institutions for concern over matters relating to 'protecting and preserving the family.' A judge in Lebanon's Sunni religious (2017) courts explained this strategy to me:

For us, if a woman came in and said my husband hit me, we don't say 'straight divorce!' We have to think about the children. We don't want them to get lost. [...]. We try to reform, repair the damage and try to ask them to make up for the sake of the children. We contact the husband and ask him to talk to the wife and try to solve the issues.

In these cases, for example, it is very likely that instances are not formally reported – and, perhaps, the cycle of violence is allowed (if not encouraged) to continue. But in Lebanon, like the rest of the world, estimates about the domestic violence rate is still alarming. According to 2016 United Nations statistics, every single Lebanese between the ages of 20 and 50 personally knows approximately 1.7 victims of family (i.e., domestic) violence.

In post-war Lebanon, inspired by the Beijing Conference and the government's ratification of CEDAW, more serious advocacy against domestic violence began, including the issue of marital rape. With the establishment of the *Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women* in 1997 and its descendant organization *KAFA* which was established in 2005 (Kingston 2013, 99; Salloukh et al. 2015, 59).⁹⁶ In 2007, shortly after its founding, *KAFA* began a serious campaign against domestic violence in Lebanon, introducing their own draft law against it. According to Salloukh et al. (2015, 66), the *KAFA* law – as the organization drafted it – allowed women to seek out a restraining order against an abuser; called for the state to establish shelters for those feeling domestic abuse; assigned public prosecutors to investigate cases of domestic violence; and would have established family violence units within Lebanon's internal security forces to address these claims specifically. Importantly, the *KAFA* law also sought to criminalize marital rape, which is specifically *excluded* by the articles of the Lebanese penal code addressing the issue of rape.⁹⁷ A year after *KAFA* proposed their draft law, the 2008 CEDAW report on Lebanon would echo *KAFA*'s intentions by urging the Lebanese state to enact legislation to

⁹⁶ More information on *KAFA* and their work can be found on their website: <https://kafa.org.lb/en>. (Accessed March 20, 2021).

⁹⁷ In Lebanese law, for example, Article 503 of the 1943 Penal Code define rape as “the forced sexual intercourse (against someone) who is not (his) spouse with violence or threat. (He) will be punished by hard labor for at least 5 years.” The 1943 Lebanese Penal Code is available through the United Nations: https://sherloc.unodc.org/res/cld/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf. (Accessed March 20, 2021).

“ensure that violence against women constitutes a criminal offence, that women and girls who are victims of violence have access to immediate means of redress and protection and that perpetrators are prosecuted and punished” (United Nations 2008, 5). Significantly, the UN CEDAW report also makes note of the issue of marital rape and urges the Lebanese state to make sure that “marital rape is criminalized” (2008, 5).

If we recall the important relationship between ‘the family’ and religious institutions in Lebanon that was discussed in the previous chapter, it may also be easier to understand why the Lebanese state sat on *KAFA*’s draft law for nearly seven years. *KAFA*’s law sought to bring the state into the private family realm, directly undermining the authority of religious institutions. This (perceived) threat to their authority may explain why religious officials opposed the law and *KAFA*’s efforts regarding domestic violence. As the Sunni religious court judge (mentioned above) explained to me:

I am against them [i.e., *KAFA*] to my bones because they are not working correctly or honestly. They are trying to change the laws and the society. And it’s creating a big problem. They are trying to ruin women’s houses, not build them.

Just as the civil marriage issue threatened the *sanctity* of this relationship, a civil code criminalizing an explicitly “family issue” like domestic violence would question the effectiveness of religious institutions as the patriarchal overseers of ‘the family’ with a man at its helm. Salloukh et al. (2015, 64) explain this point nicely: “A civil code for domestic violence calls into question the legitimacy conferred upon religious leaders to mitigate family conflicts; it raises questions concerning man’s control over his wife and family, and legitimizes a woman’s right to divorce her husband and to win custody of the children.”

In April 2014, the Lebanese government was finally ready to address the issue of domestic violence. “Law 293,” as Lebanon’s domestic violence law is formally known, was a

heavily edited version of *KAFA*'s draft from 2007. To be sure, the passing of Law 293 is significant. It marks the first time that the concept of 'domestic violence' had entered into Lebanese law and served as an important recognition that women are not only subjected to this form of violence, but that they need pathways for recourse and legal protections (Human Rights Watch 2014). However, while KAFA's draft law sought to target/protect *women* specifically – as the primary victims of domestic violence, the 2014 law reframed domestic violence as a 'family' issue – without singling out women. The 2014 law defines domestic violence as “an act, abstention therefrom, or threat thereof committed by a family member against one or more family members [...] and resulting in death or bodily, mental, sexual, or economic harm.”⁹⁸

Further, academics and activists have also pointed out a number of serious omissions within the legislation. A brief released by researchers at the American University of Beirut Policy Institute, for example, noted that while the protections offered to women under Law 293 are applicable to all women present on Lebanese lands, many refugee women (Palestinian or Syrian) who may be exposed to extreme instances of sexual or domestic violence are unable to turn to state resources, including the Internal Security Force (Moussawi and Yassin 2017). This may often be because of their undocumented status in Lebanon – or if they reside in a refugee camp. *Human Rights Watch*, too, noted that “[o]ne of the law's main shortcomings is that it fails to specifically criminalize marital rape, which is not a crime under other Lebanese law” (2014). The law sought to strike a compromise between the draft law on one hand and the opposition to it from religious institutions on the other (Salloukh et al. 2015, 67). It criminalized the “hitting,” “threatening,” and “harming” of a spouse in order to obtain what it refers to as “conjugal rights

⁹⁸ The full (English language) version of the 2014 law can be found online on the Lebanese Ministry of Justice's website: https://www.justice.gov.lb/public/uploads/Law%20On%20the%20Protection%20of%20Women_EN.PDF. (Accessed March 21, 2020).

to intercourse.” But the specific violation of a spouse’s bodily autonomy is not actually a criminal act.

Responding to these omissions, Lebanese NGO *Kafa* researched, authored, and submitted a list of proposed amendments to the Lebanese federal cabinet in August 2017. Although, this list of amendments to was almost completely ignored by Parliamentarians. It is important to mention, however, that the Lebanese government did make a minor amendment to Law 293 in late 2020. The amendment expanded the scope of the law’s original definition of domestic violence to include ‘economic’ and ‘psychological’ violence (Al-Arabiya News 2020). The amendment while important, still failed to criminalize marital rape, and maintains the original law’s disregard for (women’s) bodily autonomy.

Pop (Mostly) Tackles Domestic Violence in Lebanon

Najwa Karam

Given the amount of media and political attention that the issue of domestic violence in Lebanon has received in recent years, it is unsurprising that music celebrities, too, would use their access to various media platforms to offer their views on the subject. Perhaps most controversially (and surprisingly), not everyone came out against it. In fact, this is a case where we can see pop music working to support and reproduce forms of gendered inequality and, further, work to continue their normalization – especially in a country like Lebanon where, recalling our discussions above, forms of gender-based violence are (unfortunately) very serious problems.

Lebanese pop diva Najwa Karam has, on multiple occasions expressed her (problematic) views on domestic violence and gender relations within the home. In a 2016 interview with television host Qusi Kheder, Karam said:

I would not like women's rights to become greater than they should be. We are in danger. And I do not like the masculinity of men to become smaller than it is. We would be in danger. I fear that the man will wake up at night and the woman will come and say, 'I'm tired today. Get up and make some milk for the child.' And for the man to get up in the morning and ask her 'what did you cook for us?' and for her to say, 'I cannot because I have work today.' I like when a woman does everything she should do in her home and then go out work if she's helping her husband. Not for her to say, 'I want to occupy my time.' I am against a woman saying, 'I want to work to occupy my time, so I don't get bored.' Your work, women, is not something you can get bored of. You should cook. You should clean. You should not put that work on to a housekeeper or chauffer. [...] ⁹⁹

But Karam's views are not limited to supporting the traditional gender roles that have long sought to keep women inside the home and out of the public sphere (i.e., workforce). She has also (tragically) expressed her support for domestic violence. Responding to a question posed to her on *Twitter* in 2014 inquiring about her view on domestic violence, Karam said she 'likes' its presence in the home. ¹⁰⁰ In a 2015 radio interview with Rima Njeim, Karam opened up about the violence she experienced during her marriage. But rather than condemn the practice – as a survivor herself – Karam defended it. "I liked the beating. I wanted it," she said. "I felt that it broke my stubbornness when I was slapped." ¹⁰¹

Online fans and commentators were quick to point out how wrong Karam's words were. In response to her 2014 *Twitter* post, for example, users highlighted the serious harm done by

⁹⁹ The interview clip can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=839842436119737>. (Accessed September 17, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Her *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/najwakaram/status/480779926786678784>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

¹⁰¹ The article discussing the interview can be found here: https://www.mtv.com.lb/News/Stars_People/527576/نحوى_كرم_أكلت_قتلة_بدي_كان_بسن_ياها. (Accessed September 17, 2019).

domestic violence in Lebanon. One user, for example, asked Karam: “Do you know how many women died from domestic violence in Lebanon?”¹⁰² Another user pointed out: “This is a big issue [...] you are supposed to support this issue because you are a woman!”¹⁰³ Another user on *Blog Baladi*, in response to her 2015 comments explaining why she ‘liked’ her husband’s husband violence against her, noted: “I used to love Najwa, her beauty and voice... until she sold out and started giving her opinions publicly. Now she just seems uneducated and ignorant.”¹⁰⁴

The problems inherent in Karam’s comments need little explanation. Violence of any sort within the home – against husbands, wives, or children – should never be justified or defended – as her detractors online note. But, as with Wehbe and Klink, Karam is not an *ordinary* person and her views cannot be easily dismissed. These statements and expressions were not made in private, but in the very public venues of television, radio, and *Twitter*. When these mediums are taken together, Karam’s audience totals in the tens of millions. Indeed, at the time of writing (March 2021), Karam’s following on *Twitter* alone totals 8.4 million. It is the size of her audience that gives her comments extra weight and compounds their seriousness, and by extension, their potential to influence those who listen/read them. Indeed, this concern (about Karam in particular) was expressed to me by feminist activist Alia Awada:

The problem is that they [celebrities] don’t know the damage they are causing to our struggle to achieve women’s rights. She [Najwa Karam] has millions of followers and they are re-tweeting and salute her... We are trying to monitor this, but we have ten thousand followers, and she has millions... (2017).

¹⁰² The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/RitaKuri/status/481766240638484480>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

¹⁰³ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/rihabtunisie2/status/480785333098119170>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ The blog post discussing her comments can be found here: <https://blogbaladi.com/najwa-karam-and-domestic-violence/>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

But context also matters. Karam herself is a Lebanese celebrity and a number of her comments were made on Lebanese television/radio, presumably for an audience of (mostly) Lebanese viewers/listeners. Lebanon, as discussed at length in the previous chapter, is a society structured largely around an understanding of patriarchy that blends kinship structures with religion. This structure, too, has proven incredibly resistant to change – as demonstrated not only by the state’s reluctance to adopt reforms regarding civil marriage and citizenship, but also the ‘watered-down’ version of *Kafa*’s domestic violence law that was adopted in 2014. Further, Article 562 of the Lebanese penal code that exonerated perpetrators of ‘honor crimes’ was only repealed in 2011 (UNDP 2018, 14), and the Article 522 (‘Marry Your Rapist’ law) was only repealed in 2017. While these are certainly hard-won victories and should not be trivialized in any way, they remain part of Lebanon’s very recent history. Karam’s comments – to her millions of followers – stand against this background. In transforming herself into a domestic violence apologist, Karam (either knowingly or unknowingly) allies herself with Lebanon’s clerical and political elite that have long worked to maintain their (patriarchal) authority at the expense of women’s full citizenship rights – be it through nationality rights, the right to a civil marriage, or the right to leave an abusive relationship without losing access to/custody of her children.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, Karam works not only to further entrench patriarchy, but possibly could encourage her fans to tolerate or accept the violent situations they may find themselves in. Her views, as Arab news site, *AlBawaba* (2016a) claimed, risk “setting feminism back 100 years!”

Elissa and Mike Massy

¹⁰⁵ As noted earlier, the religious court system to handle family law matters typically – across sects – tends to deliver judgements that favor the male/husband and his kin.

While Karam has stated that she ‘likes’ the presence of violence in the home, other Lebanese pop stars have actually teamed up with women’s rights organizations to promote positive changes in Lebanese norms regarding domestic violence by condemning the practice.

Elissa is one of the Arab world’s most famous and successful pop stars. The Lebanese songstress has sold more than 30 million records worldwide and has had lucrative sponsorship deals with large international brands, such as *Pepsi* and *Head & Shoulders* shampoo (Al-Dhahir 2017). She also has a reputation for speaking out about issues she personally believes to be important. For example, she has also spoken out several times about her (controversial) views opposing the presence of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and arguing for their return to their own country, arguing that Lebanon is a small country, incapable of housing and supporting them because it already has economic hardships.¹⁰⁶

Elissa is also an outspoken defender of women’s rights. In 2015, the diva teamed up with Lebanese NGO *Kafa* and released her song, *Ya Merayti (My Mirror)*. In the video clip for the song, Elissa plays a middle-class housewife being physically abused by her husband. In one particularly chilling scene, Elissa is shown being hit and slapped by her husband before collapsing, bloodied and bruised, on the floor. By the end of the clip, we are told that Elissa had left her husband and since become a successful author, having written a book detailing her experience with abuse. “My book is about a woman who has suffered. Maybe this woman is watching today. She should know that this is not the end. Break your silence, not your reflection in the mirror,” she says holding a copy of her book.¹⁰⁷ The last scene of video clip shows

¹⁰⁶ Most recently, Elissa repeated these views in a *tweet* from July 5, 2019. The *tweet* can be found here: <https://twitter.com/elissakh/status/1147057988366192640>. (Accessed September 20, 2019). Also see the article posted on news site *Thobee*: <https://thobee.com/saudi/the-lebanese-singer-elissa-struck-syrian-refugees-with-unexpected-statements/>. (Accessed September 20, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ The video clip for *Ya Merayati* can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zKcfonLldU>. (Accessed September 20, 2019).

Kafa's logo along with their telephone number, urging abused women to reach out for help. In less than one week after the video's release on *YouTube*, it had not only garnered a whopping 1.5 million views, but also the admiration of other Lebanese musical celebrities. Fellow Lebanese pop star Maya Diab, for example, took to *Twitter* to congratulate Elissa, saying she was 'in love' with the video clip (*AlBawaba* 2015).

Similarly, Lebanese recording artist Mike Massy teamed up with Lebanese NGO *ABAAD* in 2016 and organized 11 workshops across Lebanon for women currently receiving supports from *ABAAD* in situations of domestic violence (i.e., those currently living in safe houses or using *ABAAD*'s 'safe spaces'). These workshops focused on providing forms of musical therapy to participants, allowing them to artistically express themselves and their experiences through voice, music, and drama. Inspired by the stories and feelings shared by women in the workshops, Massy was inspired to continue his collaboration with *ABAAD* and wrote the acclaimed song, *Kermali (For Me)*. The song was written, composed, and arranged by Massy himself and seeks to convey the expressions of the workshops' participants. The song itself features quotes from real-life survivors of domestic violence. "Tears are not weakness; tears could be strength; I no longer fear anyone." In addition to the emotionally charged lyrics, the song's video clip features women holding shards of broken mirrors above their faces, revealing bruises, blood, cuts, and various other injuries.¹⁰⁸

The utility of working with celebrities is not lost on women's rights organizations. As Roula Masri of *ABAAD* explained to me:

All media industries are very important for socialization in Lebanon and other countries. Media plays a big role. And if I look at the media, yes, these people are influential and to look at their influence... They have influence on the adolescents and youth. So, I cannot say 'God damn them' for what they are saying. I have to analyze where they are and the

¹⁰⁸The video clip for *Kermali* can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3EC1fYytk>. (Accessed September 20, 2019).

time we are living in because they are a role model to others and therefore I have to pay very good attention to what they are because they can be working with me or against me in the same yard because I am trying to cause change. I cannot turn a deaf ear to what they are doing and, in my opinion, [...] for them to be engaged is very important. Like now, Mike Massy came and sang a song for us and now we are seeing if we can do another song in a second campaign. So, [...] we rely on the film making industry [...] and songs and music. Why do we think they are important and [why] do we rely on them? Why... because they can change things faster than I can because they can reach a huge mass of people... (2017).

Masri's point echoes the sentiments expressed by Awada (quoted above) when she explained that the seriousness of Karam's views on domestic violence were magnified by the fact that she has 'millions of followers.' Indeed, celebrities have a reach that often far exceeds the reach of activist organizations. While this reach can 'do harm,' as is the case with Karam and her support for domestic violence, it can also become a useful tool for women's and human rights organizations seeking to exponentially increase their audience. That Elissa's *Ya Meryayti* video clip garnered an impressive 1.5 million views in less than one week is no small feat. Their ability to reach millions of people with a single *tweet* or video clip imbues (musical) celebrities with a very real form of (political) power – that other Lebanese women do not have. And while celebrity endorsements for politicians or particular causes is not novel (think of American rap musician Kanye West's now infamous online support for American President Donald Trump or the countless international celebrities who have supported animal-rights NGO *PETA*), they do stand to have a serious impact in the Arab Middle East. Ideas about and awareness of highly gendered political issues, such as domestic violence, have only recently come to the attention of political authorities in Lebanon. Celebrity 'endorsements' for rights organizations stand to not only 'get the word out' about the work of organizations like *Kafa* and *ABAAD*, but also help promote the normalization of conversations about topics once considered 'embarrassing' or 'dishonourable' by bringing them to the forefront of mainstream popular culture.

Maya Diab Dares to Support LGTBQ Peoples

While Lebanon is often presented as a bastion of social liberalism and freedom in the Middle East, much of Lebanese society and the Lebanese state still have an openly hostile relationship with members of the country's LGBTQ+ community. Openly LGBTQ+ peoples are subjected to harassment from police and military forces, experience discrimination in housing, employment, and even within their own families. In October 2018, for example, the Lebanese delegation to the 139th Interparliamentary Union in Geneva voted against a bill to end discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁰⁹ The Lebanese vote was reflective of the opinion held by many in Lebanese society, where many still consider that homosexuality is deviant, immoral, and wrong. Data from Wave 6 of the *World Values Survey* conducted in 2013, for example, suggests that 47% of the Lebanese surveyed felt that homosexuality could 'never be justified.' Another more recent survey from 2018-2019, conducted by *Arab Barometer* and the BBC found that only 6% of Lebanese surveyed believed 'being gay' to 'be acceptable.'¹¹⁰

Beyond popular opinion, LGBTQ+ peoples also have a complicated relationship with the Lebanese state. Like many other countries around the world (unfortunately), homosexuality is still (mostly) illegal in Lebanon. Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code notes that "intercourse contrary to nature is punishable by imprisonment of up to one year."¹¹¹ While the law does not *specifically* or *explicitly* mention homosexuality, it has – according to Lebanese lawyer Youmna

¹⁰⁹ For more see: <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/lebanon/>. (Accessed September 20, 2020).

¹¹⁰ The survey can be found here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/arabic-survey>. (Accessed September 25, 2019).

¹¹¹ The 1943 Lebanese Penal Code is available through the United Nations: https://sherloc.unodc.org/res/cld/document/lebanon-penal-code_html/Lebanon_Penal_Code_1943.pdf. (Accessed September 15, 2019).

Makhlouf – traditionally been interpreted by judges (and police forces) as being applicable to homosexual relationships (especially those involving two men).

It should also be mentioned that a number of precedent-setting rulings have begun to (slowly) erode Article 534. In 2007, for example, Judge Mounir Suleiman from the Batroun Court halted the criminal prosecution of two men arrested under the law. In his ruling, Suleiman directly challenged the law's assumption about what constitutes 'natural' relationships. "Man is part of nature and is one of its elements, so it cannot be said that any of one his practices or any one of his behaviours goes against nature, even if it is criminal behaviour, because it is nature's ruling," Suleiman stated in his ruling (quoted in Wael 2014). Citing Suleiman's 2009 decision, the Jdeide District Court in Beirut also threw out a case presented by the state against a transgendered woman accused of having sexual relations with a man in 2014 (Littauer 2014). And recently in 2017, Metn District Judge Rabih Maalouf declared that "homosexuals have a right to human and intimate relationships with whoever they want, without any interference or discrimination in terms of their sexual inclinations, as it is that case with other people" (quoted in Reid 2017). Despite these incredibly important rulings, however, they have not resulted in the removal of Article 534 from the penal code or even the decriminalization of homosexuality in Lebanon.

Further complicating the position of LGBTQ+ peoples in Lebanon, is the relationship that the state has come to form with LGBTQ+ activism. This form of activism, it should be noted, is a relatively new addition to the Lebanese activism scene, having emerged in the early 2000s. One of the country's most prominent LGBTQ+ rights organizations, *HELEM*, for example, was founded in 2004. Interestingly, since its founding, the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, which must formally licence and recognize non-governmental/civil

society associations, has refused to recognize *HELEM*. This lack of formal recognition, moreover, means that the group cannot (legally) open a bank account, take on legal cases, or apply for funding (Salloukh et al. 2015, 62). Despite this lack of formal recognition, however, the state has demonstrated its willingness to ‘partner’ with *HELEM* to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in Lebanon. Partnering with the Ministry of Public Health, *HELEM* works to raise awareness of and offer screening for HIV/AIDS. *HELEM*, critics observe, was presented with a peculiar problem. On one hand, they could accept the medical and social costs associated with state indifference and prejudice. On the other, they could partner with the state, accept the stigma associated with the view that HIV/AIDS is predominately a problem associated with the gay community, and – by doing so – allow to the state to continue along its largely discriminatory trajectory (Salloukh et al. 2015, 56).

Further, as in many other countries, religious officials in Lebanon have also expressed their anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. Aside from the formal prohibition of homosexuality through religion, religious officials, for example, have called on political and security officials to crack down and cancel the Beirut Pride Festival since its inception in 2017. The first of its kind in the Arab/Muslim world, the festival has not only faced cancellations from reserved venues, but has also been forced to close and cancel events. The 2019 festival, for example, was forced to close its opening concert because religious officials – including no one less than the Grand Mufti of Lebanon – felt that it would promote same-sex marriage, debauchery, and immorality (BBC 2019a).

In this complicated and hostile environment, moreover, it becomes easier to understand why pop diva Maya Diab found herself in the middle of a scandal in 2016. Diab announced over social media that she intended on performing at Beirut’s *Posh Rooftop* nightclub. The venue,

however, is known as a popular party destination for Beirut's gay community. The announcement was met with anger from some of Maya's fans, including Editor-in-Chief of popular celebrity news magazine, *Al Jaras (The Bell)*, Nidal al-Ahmadiyyeh (Albawaba 2016b). In true diva style, Maya Diab issued her response to the critics online via her official *Instagram*. Diab posted a photo of herself in a skin-tight nude bodysuit overlain with text reprimanding her 'sick-minded' critics. Diab wrote:

To all sick-minded people, in all domains, living in denial, judging other people and refusing to accept who they are, I have one question for you: قولولي انتو مين [tell me who you are]
 to judge other people قولولي انتو مين [tell me who you are]
 to judge God's creation قولولي انتو مين [tell me who you are]
 Open your mind before you open your mouth. We all live together. Learn how to accept each other. When you can accept yourself as you are and accept others as they are, you will finally have peace. You need serenity to accept others and clear conscience to accept yourself. Music has no boundaries, no race and no religion.
 This is my passion, my love, my job and my career.

Diab's photo was accompanied by a number of hashtags including #humanrights, #knowledge, and #spreadlove. To make the message even clearer, she also included an *emoji* of a rainbow, a common international symbol associated with the promotion of same sex rights.¹¹²

Have Diab's actions resulted in dramatic legal or social changes in Lebanon? No, they have not, but this is also not my argument here. What is important that Diab has demonstrated that she knows *where* she is and *where* she is from. She not only has an awareness of the social politics of her home country but is also willing to use her voice to take a stand against inequalities. Diab is clearly aware of the social (and even professional) risks associated with openly presenting herself as an ally of LGBTQ+ peoples and rights, but has chosen, despite these realities, to deploy her massive social media following in service of her activism. For reference,

¹¹² Diab's photo can be found on her public *Instagram* account: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BJ-yA5Yjcqy/>. (Accessed September 30, 2019).

Diab (at the time of writing in March 2021) has an impressive 8.3 million followers on Instagram. Further, former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri has a following of 288 thousand and President Michel Aoun has 51.8 thousand. While it is very likely not all of Diab's followers are located in Lebanon, her audience, and fan base remain concentrated in the Arab world and, to that end, her activism is still important. Considering that Diab's posts (like other celebrities) are *retweeted, shared, reposted*, or written about by entertainment news sites and blogs, her reach is exponentially larger than that of two of the most powerful political men in Lebanon. And that not only allows Diab to be seen as an important ally for those campaigning for greater LGBTQ+ rights in Lebanon and around the Arab world, but also – like other stars – makes her politically powerful because when she speaks out, millions of people are there to listen. Indeed, activists themselves even view her as an ally in their struggles for equality. NGO *HELEM*, for example, shared Maya's *Instagram* post on their *Facebook* page, giving the songstress a shout-out for allying herself with their cause.¹¹³ Comments from group members on the post were overwhelmingly supportive: "Love her!"; "Nice Maya..."; "I have always liked her"; and "You go girl." The support from *HELEM*, too, offers Diab's efforts a sort of credibility and do make her seem like a real ally for in their struggles for sexual equality.

(Pop)ular Activism

Speaking out about socio-political issues that have, for generations, been viewed as shameful, embarrassing, or immoral is – in any geographic or social context – not an easy undertaking by any means. As Canadians, for example, we struggle against our country's historical (and ongoing) mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples. Americans, too, struggle against

¹¹³ *HELEM*'s post can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/133916233311662/photos/maya-diab-a-lebanese-pop-star-responds-to-the-homophobic-campaign-thats-targetti/1110116389024970/>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

the painful legacy of slavery and institutionalized, Jim Crow-style racism. As these cases demonstrate, historic injustices can be tremendously difficult to overcome.

In the Lebanese context, the present degree of openness regarding issues of gender and sexuality would have been unthinkable even a generation ago. Issues relating to domestic violence, rape, and homosexuality would have been wrapped up tightly and been kept hidden within the family and handled discretely with the assistance of religious institutions. And while this certainly still happens now (as discussed above), the 50-foot billboards of bloodied women in wedding gowns I saw in downtown Beirut would not have been there. In the 1960s and 1970s, during my parents' youth, a colorful LGBTQ+ Pride celebration marching down Riad al-Solh street in downtown Beirut, steps away from the al-Omari Grand Mosque would not only have been impossible, but unimaginable.

This is not to say that Lebanon's work is done or that the country can rest on its laurels. Lebanon's domestic violence legislation and the pro-LGBTQ+ rights legal rulings are certainly positive developments, and I do not wish to undermine them at all. Rather, mindful of our discussion in the previous chapter, they are suggestive of the incremental pace that reform has often tended to take in Lebanon. LGBTQ+ peoples still face a number of forms of discrimination in Lebanon, and homosexuality is still technically not decriminalized. The state has also – likely at the behest of religious organizations – criminalize marital rape, thereby institutionalizing its respect for women's bodily autonomy. These two limited examples, therefore, reveal how much work remains to be done.

Importantly, a number of Arab pop stars have lent their voices to helping this sort of work. Myriam Klink has openly challenged the clientelist and 'inherited' workings of Lebanese politics. She has also been an outspoken (albeit controversial) advocate for women's rights, their

ownership of their own bodies, and their right to wear what they want. Elissa and Mike Massy have partnered with Lebanese feminist NGOs to help address the largely taboo issue of domestic violence. Maya Diab has positioned herself as an ally to Lebanon's marginalized LGBTQ+ community.

And while the awareness-raising efforts of these pop stars is commendable, other pop starlets have worked to hinder this kind of activism. Haifa Wehbe, for example, has openly spoken about her views on international relations between Israel and Lebanon. In doing so, however, she has expressed (controversial) support for *Hezbollah* and its polarizing leader, Hassan Nasrallah. In doing so, I argue that Wehbe rather than using celebrity status as a platform to promote messages of unity, uses it as a vehicle to push and reinforce – what I interpreted to be – sectarianism in an already divided society. Pop megastar Najwa Karam, similarly, has used her celebrity status on numerous occasions to vocalize problematic views that support and encourage domestic violence in a largely patriarchal society where it constitutes a very serious problem.

Activists, moreover, recognize the power celebrities wield by virtue of their massive social media reaches. Having a celebrity support your cause can, after all, be an effective awareness-raising tactic, as their fans may be inspired to learn or speak out about issues. On the other hand, they also recognize the need for nuanced messages and tactics, suggesting that revealing clothing could – for example – risk derailing messages about bodily autonomy. Political officials, too, have been quick to dismiss these forms of awareness-raising, suggesting that musical celebrities should stay in their lanes. Minister Ogasapian, for example, told me that “no one looks at [Haifa Wehbe] for her voice” (2017). And as Minister of Culture Ghattas Khoury noted:

we should listen to their voice, not their political views...Everybody should do what he is... what he excels in. If I go to sing, I think people would be... it would be a disaster. But I do what I do. [...] And I think whatever these singers say on their social media or about their private lives is none of our interest (2017).

Ogasapian and Khoury fail to recognize, however, that these pop stars are Lebanese themselves. By virtue of that identity, they are permitted to have opinions about the social politics of their home country, but they can also express them – just as any other citizen. But what separates Diab, Wehbe, Klink, Karam, and Elissa from *ordinary* folk is that they are able to deploy the ‘power of music,’ and command an audience – with the help of social media – that *ABAAD*, *KAFA*, or any other group does not. The reach that their fame and celebrity give them makes their opinions and efforts to raise awareness about causes that they are passionate about (however misguided at times, possibly) “of our interest.”

Nancy Ajram, the Arab Pop Golden Girl

In 2017, *Forbes Middle East* released its list of the ‘Top 100 Arab Celebrities.’ Of the top 10 celebrities, 9 were Arab pop stars, emphasizing the unique place held by pop music in contemporary Arab popular culture. Further, of the top 5 celebrities on the list, 3 are Lebanese pop stars already discussed throughout this thesis. Najwa Karam placed 5th and Elissa placed 3rd. Capturing the prestigious 2nd place was Lebanon’s own pop music megastar, Nancy Ajram.¹¹⁴

Since signing with label *EMI* at the young age of 15, Ajram has now been a household name for over two decades. Ajram herself, however, is humble about her success and credits her fans. As she noted in a 2019 interview with *Emirates Woman*, “I’ve worked so hard and I’ve made very good choices, so I reached where I am because of people’s love and appreciation. I’m very grateful for that” (quoted in Hakami 2019). Indeed, Ajram’s ‘very good choices’ include

¹¹⁴ In case my reader is curious, the coveted first place spot went to Egyptian pop star Amr Diab. The full list can be found here: <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/list/the-top-100-arab-celebrities>. (Accessed October 13, 2020).

very, very meticulous attention towards how she is presented and how she presents herself to her Arab audiences.

While other Arab (female) celebrities have pushed very rigid socio-cultural boundaries with their presentations of sex, sexuality, and even their wardrobes, Ajram has largely managed to escape unscathed by controversy and scandal.¹¹⁵ Even a superficial glance of Ajram's social media profiles will produce no photos of the starlet in bikinis, skin-tight body suits, or any other clothing that would reveal much of her chest or rear. And to this end, Ajram does not really provoke *offence*. In fact, I argue that Ajram seeks to do the complete opposite. She appears to strive to present herself as Arab pop's golden girl. The posts on her various social media platforms appear to be consciously apolitical. And while many of her musical peers have explicitly engaged with various socio-political issues, Ajram seems to avoid them. But doing so does not render Ajram (and her public persona) free of politics.

Ajram's social media profiles, her *Instagram* in particular, present the world with an image of a dutiful wife and loving mother. Indeed, her page is replete with photos of her happy marriage. One photo, for example, shows a smiling Ajram standing behind her husband with her arms around his shoulders. The photo is captioned: "Don't worry, Honey. I've got your back."¹¹⁶ Another, a birthday post dedicated to her husband, shows Ajram and her husband seated,

¹¹⁵ Importantly, Ajram did find herself at the center of an anti-LGBTQ+ scandal in 2018 after a performance in Gothenburg, Sweden. Ajram's concert overlapped with the city's annual Pride Festival and reports accused Ajram and her management team of banning the rainbow striped LGBTQ+ pride flag from the venue (Khalaf 2018). As news of the flag ban broke, outrage erupted on *Twitter* and other social media platforms, with fans accusing her of homophobia. Quick to respond to the criticism, Ajram turned to *Facebook* and in a post from August 22, 2018 explained what happened: "I would like to clarify that my management and myself have nothing to do with the pride flags and that the stage pride decorations removal decision was taken by the organizer himself. I would like to clarify once and for all that I respect everyone's choices without any discrimination. I had never put myself in a position to judge or issue prejudgements especially that personal life is private and no one has the right to interfere in." Ajram's full post can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/NancyAjram/posts/10156905139885934>. (Accessed October 3, 2019).

¹¹⁶ The photo is available on Ajram's public *Instagram* profile: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bp5X5uznXx_/. (Accessed October 3, 2019).

smiling, as he holds her in his arms. The caption, too, is telling: “You are the husband every woman wants, the father every child will love. Happy birthday my best friend, my love, my husband.”¹¹⁷ Another post, to commemorate Ajram’s wedding anniversary, shows Ajram and her husband in a standing embrace, captioned: “This day will always be the happiest day of my life. Happy wedding anniversary my love.”¹¹⁸

Ajram’s three young daughters are also featured prominently on her *Instagram*. To wish her fans a merry Christmas in 2018, for example, Ajram posted her family’s Christmas portrait. The entire family is shown smiling, positioned before a fireplace, wearing coordinated black and plaid outfits.¹¹⁹ Another recent photo was taken at the baptism celebration for Ajram’s youngest daughter, Lya. The photo shows Ajram holding her infant daughter with her husband and two older daughters standing beside her. The family is positioned behind a lavishly decorated table covered with catered food and desserts, including a professionally decorated three-tiered cake.¹²⁰ Ajram also recently uploaded a short video recording of herself casually lying on a sofa while her youngest daughter sits on her chest. Ajram is shown laughing and smiling and she plays with her young daughter. The short recording is captioned, “My heart.”¹²¹

At first glance, these photos are really quite unremarkable. There is, after all, nothing strange or ‘wrong’ with a mother loving her children or expressing affection towards their father. And the intention here is certainly not to argue that there is. My goal here is to explore how

¹¹⁷ The photo is available on Ajram’s public *Instagram* profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrvahAMnOtf/>. (Accessed October 3, 2019).

¹¹⁸ The photo is available on Ajram’s public *Instagram* profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B13D8Sbn5JM/>. (Accessed October 3, 2019).

¹¹⁹ The photo is available on Ajram’s public *Instagram* profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Brx8PTrn3m7/>. (Accessed October 3, 2019).

¹²⁰ The photo is available on Ajram’s public *Instagram* profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2cMd8VHFUS/>. (Accessed October 7, 2019).

¹²¹ The short clip is available on Ajram’s public *Instagram* profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3PY-6GnOzr/>. (Accessed October 7, 2019).

Ajram's public persona – the version of Nancy Ajram made available to the world – itself is political.

Returning briefly to our earlier discussion of discourse, Foucault (1972) reminds us of the power of discourse and its complicated role in shaping the world around us – and subsequently, how we come to understand and interpret it. But again, I do not simply use the term discourse as a synonym for 'language' or 'words.' Rather, discourses can be understood as complete systems of thoughts, attitudes, actions, beliefs, and practices that cooperate to construct the myriad of worlds and acts of which they speak. Of the myriad of discourses that exist within any one social context, those surrounding gender and sexuality are amongst the most powerful and enduring. Failure to adhere to the norms associated with gender, to 'believe in the fiction' as Butler (1990, 140) observes, does not go unnoticed. Rather, these cultural fictions are given credibility through the "punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (such as various forms of harassment and discrimination; 140). The norms themselves, however, are left intact.

Indeed, the power of these discourses has been visible throughout this chapter and dissertation. It was Haifa Wehbe who was blamed for wearing a dress that 'shocked the Arab world.' It was Myriam Klink whose voice was literally banned on Lebanese television for singing about sex. And it was Maya Diab who was required to justify her support for LGBTQ+ peoples. In each case, it was the women individually who were asked to defend themselves, were insulted or degraded, and otherwise taken to task over their individual failures. The underlying (and patriarchal) norms that inform how women should dress, or why it is that homosexuality is deemed to be abnormal, or why talking about sex is so problematic each went unchanged, unquestioned, and remained unproblematic.

Unlike her more scandalous peers, Ajram's public persona stands beside these complicated (and rigid) discourses. In presenting herself as a loving wife and mother, Ajram aligns herself with the dominant status quo of patriarchy that inserts itself into nearly every facet of life in Lebanon: she got married (to a man); she had children within the confines of that marriage; she loves and supports her husband; and she now cares for and nurtures her children. To this end, she is uncontroversial. Those things each seem normal to (many of) us because they fall in line with dominant narratives or discourses (in most of the world) of what women are supposed to do.

But as discourse analysts remind us, it is not only what is explicitly said that is significant, but what remains unsaid and taken for granted that are also important. Two examples, I think, would be demonstrative here. First, recall that Lebanon's relationship with LGBTQ+ issues and peoples, despite a number of important legal victories, remains problematic (as it is in the majority of Arab countries). No formal legal protections exist for LGBTQ+ peoples to shield them from economic or social discrimination (i.e., hate speech, etc.) based on their sexuality; same-sex marriage is not permitted; and mechanisms for same-sex couples to start/build families - such as in-vitro-fertilization (IVF) or joint adoption - are not permitted. LGBTQ+ peoples - their hopes, aspirations, and even their existence - are made invisible. In fact, the cancellation of Pride events in Lebanon, too, I think, works to symbolize this 'invisibility.' They are completely excluded and prohibited from the enjoyment of the very same privileges Ajram is able to enjoy and flaunt so liberally and unproblematically.

Second, even a cursory glance of Ajram's social media reveal an important class dimension. Ajram is one of the most commercially successful artists in the region and is, consequently, financially well-off. The glimpses into her life that she (or her managers) choose

to make public via social media display this commercial success. Yet, her posts do not include captions explicitly commenting on her wealth. The displays are more subtle, showing her fans the lavish celebration, gifts, and decorations at her youngest daughter's baptism or photos showing Ajram and her daughter swimming in a private, rooftop pool. These images stand against the staggering unemployment and poverty rates in Lebanon (and much of the Arab world). Indeed, in Lebanon the overall unemployment rate is 25% (Hamadi 2019), and estimates suggest that nearly 1.35 million people (in a country with a population of only about 6 million) live below the poverty line (Sleem and Dixon 2018, 338). Here again, the doors to the lifestyle Ajram presents are closed off to many in Lebanon (and the Arab world, broadly). Many mothers cannot afford to host lavish parties for their children and many Lebanese simply do not have access to private, rooftop pools.

The point I am trying to make through these two examples – again – is not that Ajram's love of her family is somehow wrong. Rather, I am saying that when her public persona – as this loving mother and wife – is juxtaposed against the socio-political realities of Lebanon (and much of the Arab world) it no longer becomes normal or benign. We can see how Ajram's persona stands beside powerful discourses with the power to cause harm (physical, economic, social, etc.) to those existing on their peripheries. Phrased differently, Ajram – just like Karam vis-à-vis domestic violence – aligns herself with the operation of patriarchy in Lebanon. And whether or not Ajram's 'good choices' included a conscious or unconscious decision to *avoid* challenging these discourses – that is, openly challenging Lebanon's stance on LGBTQ rights (as Maya Diab has); or by raising awareness about violent marital relationships (as Elissa has); or even by bringing attention to the harsh realities of poverty in Lebanon – she has still benefitted from their existence (financially, socially, etc.). To this end, she becomes complicit in their continuation. In

this way, we can understand how a celebrity who, despite avoiding confrontation, scandal, and even politics in a formal sense, remains ‘political.’

Conclusion

This chapter began with a brief discussion of the supposed apolitical nature of Arab pop. In response to this criticism, I pointed out that dismissing the genre as being almost exclusively devoted to ‘selling sex,’ fails to consider the number of important ways Arab pop and its artists attaches to the current Lebanese socio-political context. Haifa Wehbe, I argued, engaged and promoted sectarianism with her ‘re-telling’ of the Israel/Hezbollah conflict in 2006. Myriam Klink, too, has entered the Lebanese popular imagination and spurred conversations about a woman as Lebanese President. She has even appeared on national talk shows to talk about women’s rights and women in politics. Maya Diab questioned the norms allowing for discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. And Elissa has worked with feminist NGOs to bring an end to violence against women in Lebanon. While each of these starlets has attached themselves to some facet of Lebanese socio-political life and sought promote changes, other celebrities, I argued, have worked in the service of the status-quo. Najwa Karam, for example, has been a very vocal advocate of traditional gender roles and (unfortunately) even for domestic violence. I also examine the case of Nancy Ajram and argue that her ‘obvious’ apolitical persona, too, is political when understood to uphold and promote traditional gender norms.

In our culture, it is the man that makes things move...

– Rihab Morra (2017),
Retired Secondary Teacher
Beqaa, Lebanon.

Chapter Five: Culture, Pop, and Revolution

Introduction

As the child of Lebanese immigrants, I have been made familiar with a number of the shortcomings of the Lebanese state since my infancy. My parents explained how political instability, poverty, and limited economic opportunities contributed to each of their decisions to leave Lebanon and settle in a country whose culture and customs were largely unfamiliar to them. Accepting this *foreignness*, to them, seemed like a necessary price to pay for Canada's political stability and economic opportunities. My father has shared stories of scarcity, telling us how our grandfather would sometimes be required to skip meals because there was not enough food for the entire family. My mother has recalled the Civil War. She has told us that her family hid in the small storage room in my grandparents' home for fear of the armed Christian militias going door-to-door inspecting identification cards and shooting Muslims on sight. These are not

easy stories to hear. Not only because my parents, whom I love and respect so much, had struggled and gone through such hardships, but because those events and experiences each served as tiny catalysts, cooperating to eventually bring about my own privileged existence – as far removed from the Beqaa Valley as it may have seemed at times.

Being made aware of one's own positionality relative to a complicated web of macro-level political realities is truly sobering. If regional conflicts had not spilled into Lebanon, would the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) have entered into armed conflict with Christian militias in Lebanon? Would a tragic shooting on a bus in East Beirut in 1975 have taken place? Would that shooting have served as the spark that ignited the blaze that eventually consumed Lebanon, dragging the country into the darkness of Civil War? Would a Civil War even have happened? Would my parents have met? Would they have married? And would Jamal, Lena, and Mohammed Saleh exist? In the absence of divine psychic gifts, these numerous questions are, of course, impossible to answer. What we are left with then is a chain of politico-historical events that dramatically altered not only my family's personal history, but the history of an entire country and its people.

And now, nearly 30 years after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, modern Lebanon is run by many of the *sons* and *grandsons* of the very same “men who made things move” in the 1970s and 1980s. While the continued *inherited* nature of governance in Lebanon raises important questions about the how much the Civil War *actually* altered the country's power structures, it is not simply that political surnames have remained. Many of the domestic problems that crippled the Lebanese state during my parents' youth have also remained. It took nearly 30 years and the maturation of a new generation of young Lebanese, but in fall of 2019 enough was finally enough. In mid-October, Lebanon was rocked by the largest nation-wide protests the

country had seen in over a decade after the announcement of the government's new tax measures.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the early weeks of the protest, before turning its attention towards a brief detailing of corruption in Lebanon. I then turn my attention towards a discussion of the role of social media in the protests. Finally, I discuss pop music's involvement in the protests before concluding with final words about the future of Lebanon.

WhatsApp with that Tax?

My paternal uncle and aunt also reside in Ottawa. And since beginning my doctoral studies at Carleton, I have been invited to their home every Friday for dinner. These dinners, while now something of a tradition for us, are often colored with lengthy discussions of Lebanese politics while Arabic-language Lebanese news plays on the television in the background. My aunt, often lamenting that 'nothing changes in Lebanon,' dislikes political discussions. My older cousins, also born in Canada, have never really followed Lebanese politics closely enough to sustain conversations on the subject. And so, these conversations have typically taken place just between my uncle and me.

It was a Friday in mid-October and, as usual, Lebanese news served as the white noise to our buzzing family gathering. While I focused on my oversized slice of *sfouf*, a yellow sponge cake garnished with almonds or pine nuts, my uncle was listening to the news anchor discuss the new wave of protests that had recently begun taking place across Lebanon. He nudged me and directed my attention to the television. "The Lebanese people were off their backs [i.e., they were not making demands of their politicians]," he said. "They had these phones and were distracted by them. They're [i.e., mobile phones] all they had to occupy themselves. And they go and take those away too. Hunger. Garbage. Theft. Taxes. There's no water. There's no

electricity. And even *WhatsApp*. What is left? They're [i.e. Lebanese politicians] all crooks." (He was, as we will see, referencing the (now misguided) tax placed on *WhatsApp* by the Lebanese government.)

Nonetheless, in only a few sentences, my uncle summed up many of the problems that have tormented the Lebanese state for decades, culminating in the current economic crisis. According to both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, Lebanon is the third most indebted country in the world, with a debt to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio of 150%. Lebanon's unemployment rate hovers around 25% and nearly 27% of the Lebanese population lives below the poverty line. These numbers form part of the backdrop against which the October 2019 Lebanese protests are set.

To be sure, October 2019 was a hard month for Lebanon. In the early weeks, Northern regions battled the worst wildfires the country had seen in years, threatening Lebanon's sacred cedar forests. Fiscal mismanagement and poor organization rendered the Lebanese state incapable of handling the crisis alone. Images of Lebanon's own water-bombing plane, rendered unusable due to poor maintenance, were juxtaposed against images of the Biblical forests ablaze. These images offered frustrated Lebanese another painful symbol of just how troubled their country was (BBC 2019b). Eventually, the Lebanese government pleaded with neighboring Greece and Jordan to assist with firefighting efforts.

In an attempt to drum up new sources of revenue, the Lebanese government announced new taxes on a number of goods and commodities in mid-October: cigarettes, petrol, and voice-calls mediated through messaging apps, like *WhatsApp*. The tax would impose a \$6.00 US/month fee on *WhatsApp*. The day of the announcement, several dozen protesters assembled outside the Parliament building in downtown Beirut. By 11:00PM on October 17 – the very same day the

protest began – it was announced that the government, bowing to mounting pressure, had opted to scrap the *WhatsApp* Tax. But it was too little, too late.

As Manuel Castells (2009, 424) argues, social media and communication technologies offer frustrated individuals a space to articulate feelings of anger with others. This communication transforms “lonely days of despair into shared days of wrath.” And so, social media – and likely *WhatsApp* in particular – served as the tool through which the Lebanese articulated their call to arms (2009, 425). The following day, October 18, thousands of protesters descended upon downtown Beirut. Streets, businesses, and banks were closed. Traffic was blocked. And Beirut’s normal functioning was forced into a standstill. Protests quickly popped up in other cities and towns across the country: Sur, Tripoli, Zahlé, Sidon, Nabatieh, and other smaller municipalities throughout Lebanon.

Across the country, mass public rage – arguably – for the first time in the country’s short history as a republic, was unified in its directionality. Rather than attacking one another as members of different sectarian communities, collective frustration was directed exclusively at the ruling elite who many believed lined their pockets for decades while driving the Lebanese state straight into the ground.

Corruption Concerns

Writing in the late 1960s, Michael Hudson (1968, 252) observed that “[p]rolonged experience with governmental corruption contributes significantly to the popular cynicism and disillusionment that deprive the political institutions of legitimacy.” Given the popular uprising that began in October of 2019 took issue with Lebanon’s long-standing relationship with political corruption, I believe that it may be useful to pause briefly and describe the situation to my reader. *Transparency International*, for example, ranks Lebanon at 140 out of 180 countries

on its Corruptions Perception Index.¹²² But as historians and scholars of Lebanon have observed, the history of corruption in Lebanon runs deep.

Lebanon, like many other countries of the Global South, is “sparsely endowed with information on its political, economic, and social life” and this dearth of information, scholars concede, “hampers” efforts to understand how pervasive the practice really is in the country (Leenders 2012, 15). Despite this, scholars have still sought to assess and comment on the *corrupt* state of affairs in Lebanon. Indeed, in his oft-cited book, *The Precarious Republic*, on Lebanon prior to the Civil War, Michael Hudson argues that corruption has long been “a distinctive feature of the Lebanese political system” (1968, 252). Hudson explains that Lebanon’s first President, Bishara al-Khoury, institutionalized the traditional rivalries between Lebanon’s political/economic elites by including them within Cabinet formations. This worked to give Lebanon’s political elites a ‘stake’ in the system – rather than leaving them free to use their collective powers to challenge or undermine it (or his authority). His calculated political decisions were the result of his understanding of the country’s long history with patronage and clientelism. The political/economic elites whose cooperation and support he needed were also patrons to their respective communities/supporters and had their own debts to repay. Corruption became, as Hudson notes, “the inevitable price of cooperation” (1968, 268).

In the post-war context, however, the scale of corruption in Lebanon would become astronomical. First, in the post-war context the state institutions designed (at least in principle) to act as ‘corruption watchdogs’ were, to use Leenders’ word, “muzzled” by Lebanese politicians (2012, 164).¹²³ No serious steps were taken by post-war governments to restore the capacities

¹²² The page can be accessed here: <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/lebanon>. (Accessed March 30, 2021).

¹²³ The Central Inspection Board and the Court of Accounts are the two state institutions designed to take disciplinary actions against public servants and to reveal administrative irregularities (Leenders 2012, 164).

and independence of these organizations. This neglect has often manifested as extreme personnel shortages. Appointments to the most serious offices within these organizations have been subject to intense debate amongst the Lebanese President, Prime Minister, and Speaker. As these debates played out, however, the work of the organizations' was largely halted as they waited for their new directors/presidents to be appointed. These cessations of work often meant that many transactions conducted by state ministries or institutions were not subjected to any form of auditing at all. Further, when the intense politicking over presidential/directorial appointments to these watchdog organizations was done, they often chose "compromise candidates" who had little experience in financial or governmental auditing processes, and even less interest in taking their jobs seriously (Leenders 2012, 165). To this end, Lebanese state watchdog agencies have largely failed to implement serious checks and controls on government officials' actions or perform audits on governmental expenditures (Leenders 2012, 224).

This lack of oversight and the weakening of the institutions designed to provide it has been colored by the dealings of the country's "oligarchic" political elites. Amongst themselves, they "competed for the right to control and instrumentalize different pieces of the state apparatus" (Kingston 2013, 57). Former billionaire-turned-politician Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, for example, applied the power of the state to campaign for laissez-faire economic policies that facilitated the reconstruction of Beirut's downtown following the Civil War. Arguing that the post-war Lebanese state was weak and could not finance the project, he suggested that private enterprise be brought in to handle reconstruction efforts. A public-private real estate company, *Solidere*, emerged from Hariri's vision. *Solidere* is a private company and is traded on the stock exchange, but it was also given special powers of compulsory purchase and regulatory authority. In essence, observers note, it was given "the mandate to manage the city

centre like a mini-fiefdom” (Wainwright 2015). Indeed, virtually all Lebanese state institutions whose mandates touched on the operation of *Solidere* were “marginalized” and the company took over issues of city planning and built public infrastructure “without genuine accountability to anyone else” (Leenders 2012, 214). The situation is made more complicated by rumours that have suggested Hariri was a “principle shareholder” in the company before his death (Yassine 2020a). His son and political heir, Saad Hariri, has denied these rumors, claiming that his family only owns six percent of the shares in *Solidere*. Whether or not the Hariri family owns a majority or minority stake in *Solidere*, however, is not the real issue. This short example demonstrates how Lebanese political/economic elites have worked to “transform corruption into the rule rather than the exception in the post-war period” and have allowed themselves to extract wealth from the state (directly or indirectly) in the process (Kingston 2013, 58).

This economic corruption, moreover, also goes hand-in-hand with other forms of fraud that work to undermine democratic institutions in Lebanon, namely electoral fraud. Indeed, elections in Lebanon have been marked by forms of electoral fraud since 1943. Hudson (1968, 252-4) has observed that even prior to the Civil War, vote buying, bribery, coercion and forms of corruption were “quite common” in the Lebanese electoral process. These processes, scholars note, have since been ‘intensified’ in the post-war context (Kingston 2013, 59). Having learned well while under Syrian tutelage, gerrymandering is routinely used to manipulate elections in ways that result in the consistent re-election of political elites who may lack popular support. This practice, Leenders (2012, 148) argues, was used in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 parliamentary elections. Aside from these *technical* manipulations, (sect-based) political clientelism has also emerged as an important electoral dynamic. Wealthy candidates who fund extensive charity networks – hospitals, clinics, schools, etc. – *gently* remind their clients of the kindnesses they

received and make sure that gratitude finds its way to the polling station on election day (Leenders 2012, 149). While these organizations may not be used directly in campaign efforts, their beneficiaries experience a powerful sense of obligation to support the host at the polls (Kingston 2013, 59). Estimates concerning the price of a successful (federal) electoral campaign in Lebanon range from \$100,000.00 to \$1,000,000.00 USD, on top of the \$6,666.00 USD needed to register as a candidate (Leenders 2012, 149). These astronomical costs, in addition to working to maintain the ‘elites-only’ accessibility of electoral politics, are also used to physically transport voters to the polls. Candidates have offered bussing, gas vouchers, and even cash payments for fuel to cover the costs associated with travel. Politicians with tremendous financial resources have even offered to purchase international plane tickets for ex-pats (in countries like Canada and Australia) to return to Lebanon to cast votes – for their sectarian party, of course.¹²⁴ These extreme measures, scholars argue, not only explain that some elected candidates lacked popular support and genuine connections with their electorates/constituents, but – more importantly – how vulnerable the Lebanese electoral politics are to charges of corruption and illegitimacy (Leenders 2012, 150).

Hariri Steps Down and Diab Dares to Lead

As the protests escalated, violence in the streets of Beirut and across the country did as well. *Hezbollah* and *AMAL* supporters took to the streets and began tearing down protest tents, throwing rocks, and attacking protesters (Sullivan 2019). Lebanon’s government was left in a position where it had to respond to the mounting pressure and increasing violence in the streets.

¹²⁴ Indeed, prior to the 2009 elections, for example, billionaire Hariri’s Future Party offered to fly in Canadian and Australian ex-pats to vote. See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/canadians-fly-on-free-tickets-to-vote-in-lebanese-election-1.827876>. (Accessed March 31, 2021).

The response: Prime Minister Saad Hariri would resign. Prime Minister Saad Hariri issued his formal resignation to President Aoun on October 29, 2019. In his resignation speech, Hariri said: “Today, I am at a dead end. [...]. Positions come and go. What is important is the dignity and safety of the country. And I also say that no one is bigger than his country. [...]. *Allah* protect Lebanon, *Allah* protect Lebanon and the life of Lebanon.”¹²⁵ Shortly after the televised resignation, protesters in Beirut could be heard chanting “*Thawra!* (Revolution!)” as they celebrated their (partial) victory.¹²⁶

Importantly, pop celebrities, too, were also quick to take to social media to add their voices to the cheers heard on the streets of Beirut. Najwa Karam, for example, took to *Twitter* and posted: “The most beautiful words we’ve heard: ‘No one is bigger than his country!’”¹²⁷ Elissa, too, took to *Twitter*: “Nobody is bigger than his country. Prime Minister Hariri resigned and confirmed that he heard the people. Thank you for having heard the voice of the people at a time when others showed us that they don’t care about the people. God be with you.”¹²⁸ Maya Diab also posted on *Twitter*: “You are acting out of your love for Lebanon. It shows the clarity of what is inside you and the clarity of what you have faced and faced so far from all the parties at the ministers’ table who never agreed.”¹²⁹

My reader will recall from earlier discussions of the Lebanese political system that the country’s Prime Minister must be a Sunni Muslim. This meant that Hariri’s resignation in

¹²⁵ The recording of his televised resignation speech from October 29, 2019 can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1M9GYF5Y2Q>. (Accessed November 10, 2019).

¹²⁶ A live streamed feed of downtown Beirut after the airing of the resignation speech on October 29, 2019 can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-WiCmLDXHo>. (Accessed November 10, 2019).

¹²⁷ Karam’s *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/najwakaram/status/1189185340042428418>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

¹²⁸ Elissa’s *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/elissakh/status/1189183483576348674>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

¹²⁹ Diab’s *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1189204915945660420>. (Accessed October 8, 2020).

October 2019 worked to create a political vacancy that only another Sunni Muslim could fill. This posed a serious challenge for the government of President Michel Aoun: where could they find another Sunni leader capable of appeasing *Hezbollah*, the protesters, Lebanon's Sunni population, and the Sunni religious establishment? It was, to be sure, a big ask of any one man (Lebanon has never had a female Prime Minister – and in light of our discussion in chapter, it seems unlikely that this will happen anytime soon). By early December, however, it seemed as if the main political parties had settled on wealthy businessman Samir Khatib. However, in his private meeting with Lebanon's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian, the country's highest Sunni Jurisconsult, Khatib announced that he did not have the support of the Sunni religious establishment, noting that the Grand Mufti maintained his support for Hariri to return as Prime Minister. Khatib then withdrew his candidacy for Prime Minister on December 8th, 2019 (*Reuters* 2019).

Following Khatib's withdrawal, Hariri's name emerged again as a possible candidate for Prime Minister – the very same post he had just vacated. As word spread of Khatib's withdrawal and the Mufti's backing of Hariri, hundreds of protesters appeared in front of Parliament that day to express their disapproval of the delays in forming a new government, of Hariri's name resurfacing, and of religious interference. As one protester told *Al-Jazeera* (2019):

We want an independent head of government. Hariri is no exception. He is one of the pillars of this authority, he and his family... They should not portray him as our savior because he has good international contacts. The head of government is for all people. We should all know that and that there is no room for religious authorities to interfere.

In response, President Aoun announced that the Parliamentary meeting set to take place on December 9th, 2019 would be postponed for one week, until the 16th. On the 19th, following a Parliamentary vote, *Hezbollah*-backed Engineering Professor Hassan Diab, was designated to

become Prime Minister. Importantly, during the Parliamentary vote, Diab received only 69 (out of 128) votes, with a number of important political figures (including former PMs Tammam Salam and Najib Mikati) and the entire *Future Movement* bloc abstaining. The anti-climactic nature of Diab's appointment and the feelings of indifference that seemed to accompany it amongst many political officials were mirrored by Lebanese pop stars. The same starlets who were so quick to respond to Hariri's resignation made no mention of Diab's appointment. This omission, perhaps, suggests that Diab was not taken seriously or, perhaps, that his government would not last long enough to make commenting worthwhile. This latter point, interestingly, was also brought up in media circles, where political commentators had already begun predicting the "imminent failure" of Diab's government (Harb 2019).

As time would reveal, Diab would indeed face a tough road ahead (and will be discussed in the coming chapter). But at the time (December of 2019), the Sunni-dominated *Future Movement* and Christian *Lebanese Forces* parties had both committed themselves to *not* participating in the new government. This meant that Diab would be tasked with forming a cabinet composed of *Hezbollah* and *Hezbollah*-allied MPs. Allying himself even more closely with *Hezbollah* will, as commentators have observed, further strain Diab's relationship with Lebanese Sunnis, many of whom already view *Hezbollah's* power in Lebanon with disdain (Azhari 2019).

Further, the weeks following Diab's appointment were marked with bickering, harsh negotiations, and the worsening financial crisis in Lebanon. After several postponements, Diab was expected to announce the members of his new 18-member Federal Cabinet on January 18, 2020. But, once again, last minute scuffles and disagreements between political factions resulted in another delay. Following the delay, senior *Hezbollah* spokesman, Sheikh Ali Daamouh,

spoke with reporters. He warned that further delays in the formation of a government meant the “country is headed into chaos, disorder and total collapse” (Quoted in Mroue 2019).

Importantly, all of this political wrangling had been taking place against a backdrop of increasingly violent and dangerous protests in Beirut and across Lebanon. As Castells (2015, 107) warns: “No challenge to the state’s authority is left unanswered.” Indeed, January 19-20, 2020 marked the most violent weekend in Beirut since the (mostly) peaceful protests began in October 2019. Following the Cabinet announcement delay on January 17, protesters rushed into the streets to express displeasure. They were met by Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) who threw tear gas, fired rubber bullets, wielded batons, and drenched protesters with water cannons. Protesters responded by throwing rocks, using tree branches as clubs, and firing flares and fireworks at ISF officers. In the weekend’s aftermath, 460 people were left injured, according to *Al-Jazeera* (2020a).

Perhaps taking the events of the previous weekend seriously, Diab finally announced the members of his 20-member cabinet on January 21, 2020. Reports immediately after the announcement have already noted that protesters, unsatisfied with Diab’s choices of Ministers, many of whom are backed by existing political parties, have already taken to the streets in downtown Beirut outside the Parliament building (*Al-Jazeera* 2020b).

As these heartbreaking events continue unfold, we must ask: what can we, as students of politics, learn and take away from these events?

In the early days of the protests, articles, blogs, and news reports were keen to announce that the Lebanese people sought to ‘end sectarian politics’ (Soussi 2019) and that the protests themselves were a ‘revolt against sectarianism’ (Haugbolle 2019). At the time, those claims seemed to be true – at least amongst the masses of Lebanese protesting in streets and squares

across the country. But what would it take (and mean) for the Lebanese to actually create a government that truly for ‘all people’ with ‘no room for religious authorities’ (as the protester quoted above told *Al-Jazeera*)?

It would require dramatic political change on a scale unseen before in Lebanon. It would require the ‘throwing out’ of hundreds of years of history that have worked to *factionalize* the Lebanese into religious groups. The sharing of political power amongst (sectarian) elites is really all the country has ever known. While the Taif Accord, called for the “gradual phasing out of political sectarianism,” this clearly did not happen. Instead, the sectarian cards were simply reshuffled according to Taif’s new rules. As Hudson (1997, 113) notes, Taif modified the “rules of the game” of the First Republic but it did not “alter their basic character.” That 15 years of conflict – and the peace accord that sought to end it – failed to create a government ‘with no room for religious authorities’ reveals just how powerful sectarianism is Lebanon.

Since the beginning of the protests in October of 2019, revolutionary change of this magnitude was never really on the table as the Lebanese politico-religious establishment – once again – has proven to be incredibly resistant to change, especially change that could threaten their collective grip on power. Thus, just as religious and political elites in Lebanon previously joined forces to squash forms of legal change that would grant women more equal citizenship (as we noted in chapter three), a similar phenomenon appears to have taken place in 2019.

Hezbollah(-allies) attacked protesters, tore down tents, and sought to squash dissent. Lebanon’s Grand Mufti continued to pledge his support for Hariri – even after news broke of Hariri’s *suspicious* transfer of \$16 million USD to a 20-year-old South African bikini swimwear model (Hubbard 2019). And, most recently, the Lebanese government has now boldly deployed its

machinery of repression and violence against its own people, creating an atmosphere hospitable to a further escalation of violence.

On top of all of this, the protesters themselves reject existing politicians and parties, while denouncing the widespread corruption and fiscal mismanagement that brought Lebanon towards fiscal collapse. But no leader has emerged from amongst their ranks and no other serious alternative has been offered by the protesters or nor the current ruling regime. Watching these events, astute political observers have begun to note that protesters may topple the current government, but not the ruling regime simply because there are no other *real* options to the current sectarian system and the existing powerholders in Lebanon are unwilling to relinquish their grip on power (Bar’el 2020). Thus, while early commentators labelled the Lebanon protests as the ‘new Arab Spring,’ we are starting to see how they may not actually result in dramatic structural political change. With a heavy heart, therefore, I concede that my aunt’s observation that ‘nothing changes in Lebanon’ may have more truth in it than early observers (and myself included) may have wanted to believe.

Spreading the Word

The Lebanese protests have given commentators, journalists, and academics much to discuss in the coming weeks, months, and years. Unfortunately, time constraints and extreme pressures to graduate compel me to limit the extent and depth of the analysis I am able to offer here. Having noted this, my dissertation is colored by my interest in the socio-political power of new media technologies. The internet and social media sites like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram* have connected the world on a scale never before seen in human history. A single message, video, or photograph can circle the globe in seconds, a pace that far outruns the traditional 24-hour news cycle of the 1990s (Castells 2009, 425). The true political power of

these technologies remained largely contained until the early 2010s (Castells 2009; 2015; Fenton and Barassi 2011; Maireder and Schwarzenegger 2012; Markham 2014). 2011 saw the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and the Arab Spring (the pro-democracy movements that eventually deposed authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya). That social media technologies were important tools in the limited arsenals of protesters in each case is now common knowledge. They were used to disseminate information, organize meeting points, and even strategize. At the time, governments failed to fully appreciate the potential power contained in these new technologies partly because they had never been deployed on these scales before, and, at least in the Middle East, low internet penetration rates coupled with harsh censorship had largely reinforced governmental control and authority. Manuel Castells (2015, 107-8), for example, explained this ‘disconnect’ between Middle Eastern governments’ understanding of the internet and protest within the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. Responding to mass public outrage, Egyptian authorities tried to ‘turn off’ the internet. This strategy, he argues, failed not only because the government underestimated the resiliency of the protesters, but also because true ‘disconnection’ from communication technologies is no longer possible (108). Dial-up technology, fax machines, mobile phones, and, of course, telephone landlines stepped in to allow the protesters to communicate not only with one another inside Egypt, but with those outside the country as well (109-10). And, as we now know, the protests continued.

Nearly a decade later, new media technologies would again play an important role in another wave of Middle Eastern protests. Lebanon, according to *Internet World Stats*, finds itself amongst the most *online* countries in the Middle East. Internet penetration rates in the country hover around 91%, substantial considering that the United States (for reference) is the largest internet user in the world and its rate is about 95%. This means that about 91% of the Lebanese

population can ‘get online’ in some capacity – through computers and more importantly, through mobile smartphones. Mobile technology in many Global South countries was able to step in and fill in gaps left by poorly developed/maintained domestic infrastructure, such as wired telephone lines/poles. Lebanon, still struggling to rebuild its domestic infrastructure after the Civil War, was no exception to this. As such, mobile communication technologies – *Facebook Messenger*, *WhatsApp*, and others – have become invaluable to the Lebanese. Indeed, so invaluable is this access that, according to information published by *Byblos Bank* (Lebanon’s third largest bank), the Lebanese are willing to pay amongst the highest prices in the region for mobile data. The Lebanese pay approximately \$9.21 USD/month for 1GB of data, where the Arab regional average is only \$6.76 USD/month for 1GB of data. These figures become even more pronounced when we recall that Lebanon’s unemployment rate is nearly 25%.

I can even personally attest to the importance of *WhatsApp* in the Lebanese context. The majority of my communication in Lebanon – reaching out to interview participants and arranging meeting times – was conducted over *WhatsApp*. My father reached out to his long-time friend via *WhatsApp* and secured me the access to conduct an elite interview. And even now, my parents (and other Canadian family members) use *WhatsApp* as their primary means to communicate with our family in Lebanon (through text messaging, voice memos, video chats, and voice calls).

Mindful of these statistics and this anecdotal evidence, it becomes easier to understand how an additional fee of \$6.00 USD/month to use *WhatsApp* could serve as the spark that ignited something much larger. By proposing the burdensome tax, policymakers demonstrated that they understood that *WhatsApp* was important to the Lebanese. But what they failed to fully appreciate was that it was important enough to spur a nation into mass protest.

Practically, social media and internet communication technologies offer protesters a space where they can engage in “self-representation, self-assurance, self-organization, and interaction with exterior dialogue groups, such as the mass media” (Maireder and Schwarzenegger 2012, 175). Indeed, such was the use of social media for the Lebanese. While many of Lebanon’s own mainstream television news outlets were discussing a number of (glorified conspiracy) theories, asking whether or not the protests were sponsored by America, Israel, or Iran in an effort to destabilize Lebanon/weaken *Hezbollah*/etc. (Chehayeb 2019), the protesters – like protesters in New York, Cairo, and Tunis a decade earlier – uploaded photos and videos of their movement and its aims. They posted videos of Muslims and Christians forming a human chain along Beirut’s seaside Corniche; they shared photos of themselves draped in Lebanese flags with cedar trees painted on their faces; and, most recently, they uploaded photos of themselves with bandages covering one of their eyes in solidarity with the several young protesters who permanently lost their eyesight after being shot with rubber bullets by ISF officers (Najjar 2020; Osman 2020).¹³⁰ The online content posted by the Lebanese participating in the protests have not lent support to fantastical claims of ‘foreign sponsorship.’ Rather, they appeared to unite the Lebanese under a single banner of struggle against corruption, poverty, and inequity. Images and videos of the ISF deploying excessive force have gone viral on *Twitter* and *Instagram*, drawing criticism from a host of international organizations, including the United Nations and *Amnesty International*.¹³¹ And as news of the protests spread around the world through social media and the internet, it was those very same sites that were used to organize

¹³⁰ An example of a ‘solidarity’ photo posted for those who lost their eyesight can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/thawranewslb/status/1219283627751555077>. (Accessed January 22, 2020).

¹³¹ Amnesty International, for example, has been a vocal critic of the Lebanese State’s authorization of excessive violence against the (primarily) peaceful protesters. For example, see: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/lebanon-arbitrary-arrests-and-beatings-of-protesters-must-immediately-end/>. (Accessed January 18, 2020).

protests of support for the Lebanese in other large cities around the world, including Paris, Strasbourg, Toronto, Ottawa, New York, and Washington D.C., showing that the world was watching Lebanon and its uprising unfold on social media.

These events are incredibly significant. Not only because they demonstrate a significant (and fairly recent) development in human history. Human processes of socialization and communication now exist in a realm beyond interpersonal communication. Through social media, we are each afforded the ability to ‘communicate ourselves’ each time we share a post, comment on something amusing or offensive, or upload photos or videos of the world around us (Castells 2009, 85).

Recalling our earlier discussion of discourse analysis and intersectionality, we are better equipped to understand the implications of these posts. Discourse analysis and intersectionality both draw our attention to the complicated networks of power and inequality at work in human productions and experience. Intersectionality, in particular, seeks to uncover the ways in which individual experience can be connected to larger structures of power existing at the national and international levels. Mindful of these insights, we can begin to think about how the series of photos uploaded by protesters with bandages covering their eyes mean more than what we see. In uploading these ‘solidarity photos,’ each protester makes visible their positionality relative to various structures of power. They communicate information to us about the unequal power relationships existing between protesters and the state’s willingness to deploy its machinery of violence and repression against those who dared to challenge its authority. Importantly, intersectionality also reminds us to add the necessary context to these photos, arguing that the people who produce them exist at intersections between the country’s complicated history and their economic class amid its foundering economic position, for example.

While the events in Lebanon continue to develop and much of the metaphorical dust has yet to settle, the early months of the protests have demonstrated the importance of new media technologies. Indeed, that the proposition of a hefty tax on an already expensive method of internet-based communication sparked mass country-wide protests is telling. It was also that same technology (social media and internet-messaging apps) that allowed the Lebanese to spread word of their discontent with various forms of inequity and fiscal mismanagement in Lebanon. By sharing their grievances and aspirations online, the Lebanese have not only welcomed the world to join their struggle (as seen in the numerous solidarity protests and even the criticisms of the government by the United Nations and other international organizations), but have offered future academics, researchers, and journalists around the world invaluable primary sources for studying the origins and outcomes of their grassroots protest.

(Pop)ular Protests

As noted in the introduction to this work, pop divas and politics appear to have very little in common. This *appearance* is likely why many social scientists dismiss pop music as mere entertainment. If connections to politics are made, they are fleeting and unimportant. Afterall, the world of pop stars is full of glitz and glamour, far removed from the messy – often violent – world of politics. These assumptions, I believe, explain why Minister Ogasapian believed that ‘no one looks at Haifa Wehbe for her voice, only her body’; they informed Minister Khoury’s belief that what pop stars write on their social media profiles was ‘none of our interest’; and they allowed Minister Jarrah to dismiss the inclusion of a pop star’s name amongst the candidates for President as a ‘joke.’ Each believed that their world – the harsh, dirty world of politics – was entirely separate from the well-manicured and coiffed world of pop divas.

Yet, as I have sought to argue throughout this dissertation, pop divas and politics are, in fact, intimately connected. I have examined the intimacy of this connection through my study of Lebanese popular music and its involvement in/relationship to gender and sexuality in Lebanon. I not only argued that we should in fact ‘be interested’ in what these celebrities write on social media, but that they are largely unafraid to participate in important national political conversations, such as those surrounding domestic violence, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s clothing/appropriate dress, and even regional conflicts between Lebanon/*Hezbollah* and Israel. And in making these opinions known, they have actively sought to lend their massive reaches to advocating for changes to these norms – such as expressing support for LGBTQ+ peoples, for example. Mindful of these important examples, it should be no surprise that Lebanese pop stars have also sought to offer their opinions on the country-wide protests that began in October 2019, but directly sought to further the aims of the protest and promote changes in Lebanese politics.

Almost as soon as the protests began, Lebanese (musical) celebrities took to social media to vocalize their support for and solidarity with the protesters by flooding their feeds with nationalistic posts. Najwa Karam, for example, took to her *Instagram* and posted short musical clips. In one clip, posted October 22, 2019, for example, Karam melodically issues a warning for Lebanon’s ‘sleeping’ politicians: “Oh, sleeping ones. Oh, sleeping ones. Accountability has begun in Lebanon.” She captioned the post with the hashtag *#للوطن_كلنا* (#We are all the nation).¹³² Nancy Ajram, too, took to her *Instagram* account to show her support. She reposted a viral clip of a protester pleading with an ISF officer. The protester desperately tells the officer:

[...]. You are wearing the cedar. But you are a person, come down [i.e., off the military truck] and help me, come down and stand beside me, put your shoulder beside my

¹³² The post, from October 22, 2019, can be found on Karam’s public *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B37pZTsgeZ3/>. (Accessed November 20, 2019).

shoulder. Feel as though I am your brother, a Lebanese citizen, who is paying and does not know what he is paying for.¹³³

Ajram captioned the video with a quote from the clip, including the ‘hands praying,’ ‘candle,’ and ‘Lebanese flag’ emojis. Pop diva Haifa Wehbe also took to *Twitter* to offer her support for the protests: “There is nothing sweeter than the Lebanese people when they stand united, under one slogan, without political affiliations.” Wehbe also included the popular hashtags *#للوطن_كلنا* (*#we are all the nation*) and *#لبنان_ينتفض* (*#Lebanon_uprising*).¹³⁴ Unsurprisingly, Myriam Klink, a vocal critic of the Lebanese state, has also been very active on *Twitter* since the beginning of the uprising. On October 18, 2019, for example, almost immediately after the protests began, Klink *tweeted*: “An increase in taxes? Hit God willing!”¹³⁵

Most amusingly, however, were the wave of *tweets* mentioning Klink. A number of users took to *Twitter* to joke (or, more realistically, to comment on the sad state of affairs in Lebanon), *tweeting* that “they really should’ve chose [*sic*] Myriam Klink for president *mnel awwal* [from the beginning]”¹³⁶ Retweeting another post, one user noted that “Klinkistan >>>>>> Aounistan.”¹³⁷

Importantly, support for the protests amongst some Lebanese pop stars went beyond *tweets* and *Instagram* posts. Elissa, a megastar unafraid to comment on controversial political

¹³³ The post, from October 18, 2019, can be found on Ajram’s public *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3whuafnLKS/>. (Accessed November 20, 2019).

¹³⁴ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/HaifaWehbe/status/1185161928823525381>. (Accessed November 20, 2019).

¹³⁵ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/myriamklinkk/status/1184771961735536640>. (Accessed November 20, 2019). Additionally, the second sentence in Klink’s *tweet* directly translates to ‘Hit God willing,’ but in Lebanese-slang Arabic the word ‘تضربو’ is a generalized expression of displeasure or frustration, kind of like saying ‘bug off’ in English.

¹³⁶ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/KhayyeWalaw/status/1219237498905337856>. (Accessed January 21, 2020).

¹³⁷ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/arcticdonkeyss/status/1189840594211917824>. (Accessed January 21, 2020). Additionally, the ‘Kingdom of Klinkistan’ is the fictional country established by Myriam Klink after her ‘Klink Revolution’ (stemming from her 2012 video clip) and ‘Aounistan’ is a joke referencing Lebanese President Michel Aoun.

topics such as the presence of refugees in Lebanon and domestic violence, has, like many of her musical peers, posted numerous *tweets* in support for the protests. On January 14, 2020, for example, she *tweeted*:

We made a revolution and we closed the roads and you [i.e., the government] said you were getting to work. We left the roads to see what you [i.e., the government] were going to do, but you are not doing anything! We have waited a month for you [i.e., the government] to form a government and the dollar has doubled [i.e., value of the American dollar relative to the Lebanese Lira] and the people's money is not with them! Do you give us permission to revolt again or are we going to cause you more trouble?¹³⁸

Elissa, however, also added action to her many recent *tweets* on Lebanese politics. She has taken to the streets in support of her Lebanese compatriots. During her participation, she was shown walking around holding a large Lebanese flag. Elissa smiled, chatted with people, and even agreed to take photos with fans, according to online lifestyle magazine *beiruting.com*.¹³⁹

But what does this participation mean? I recognize that by virtue of their commercial success, these celebrities are (presumably) largely shielded from many of socio-economic hardships experienced by the majority of Lebanese. This protection, however, does not render their participation insignificant. Elissa, Myriam Klink, Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wehbe, and many others are still Lebanese citizens. They do not shy away from or seek to hide that identity. Rather, they embrace and celebrate it. They uploaded photos of the Lebanese flag superimposed on their faces¹⁴⁰; they reposted viral footage of protesters pleading with ISF officers; and they marched side-by-side with their compatriots in downtown Beirut. The message communicated by these actions is, simply, that they know they are Lebanese. But what separates these actions from

¹³⁸ The *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/elissakh/status/1217024016193593345>. (Accessed January 21, 2020).

¹³⁹ Photos of Elissa in the Beirut protests can be found here: http://desktop.beiruting.com/Elissa_Joins_in_Lebanon's_protests/30697. (Accessed January 21, 2020).

¹⁴⁰ See the photo posted by Nancy Ajram to her public *Instagram* account on October 27, 2019: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4H26f4n2Dt/>. (Accessed January 21, 2020).

the actions of the thousands of other Lebanese protesting in Martyr's Square is that their actions are immediately given more attention because they are attached to their stardom. Thus, when Nancy Ajram shared a clip of a protester speaking to an ISF officer on her personal *Instagram* page, the clip was immediately given an audience of 30 million, a reach far exceeding that of many other Lebanese and even Lebanese news networks. Thus, just as I have argued in previous chapters, (musical) celebrities, by virtue of their massive social media followings, are imbued with a very real form of (political) power, largely inaccessible to ordinary Lebanese. In this case, Lebanese starlets have opted to use that power to shine light on the Lebanese state and spread word of the protests around the world.

Gendering the Struggle

On October 31, 2019, *An-Nahar* (*The Day*), one of Lebanon's leading Arabic-language newspapers, sought to pay tribute to the many brave and selfless women who participated in the protests. The front page of the paper featured lyrics to the Lebanese national anthem with one important change that they highlighted in red ink:

All for the country, for the glory, for the flag
 From the beginning of centuries, our pencil and sword
 Our fields and mountains are making the **women** and men
 Our word and work on the way of perfection
 All for the country, for the glory for the flag.

The official lyrics to the Lebanese national anthem make no reference to women. Additionally, on the same front page, the paper changed the gendered conjugation of its name to *Naharouki*, which means 'Your Day' when said to females.¹⁴¹ (Arabic, similar to French, Spanish, and Hebrew is grammatically gendered, meaning that nouns and verbs are either masculine or

¹⁴¹ The paper posted a photo of their front page to their official *Twitter* page: <https://mobile.twitter.com/Annahar/status/1189797689841606656>. (Accessed December 28, 2019).

feminine.) Following the paper's release, *#naharouki* became a trending hashtag on social media – with Lebanese men and women alike praising the paper's efforts. The paper's female CEO (and former MP) Nayla Tueni also teamed up with Lebanese pop star Carole Samaha to create a viral video montage of the starlet singing the expanded anthem. The video featured photos and videos of the protests, overlain with the lyrics to the national anthem and finished by showing female protesters in Beirut also singing the expanded anthem.¹⁴²

An-Nahar's front page, however, is more than political pandering or tokenism. Recalling our earlier discussion of intersectionality is useful here. Feminist intersectionality, as noted earlier, seeks to connect women to larger (often macro) level structures and uncover the power dynamics at work in those connections. It has, for example, encouraged scholars to examine women's place within imaginings of nations and nationalisms. Indeed, Nira Yuval-Davis (1996; 1997; 2003) has argued that women are often placed at the very center of these imaginings, allowing for complicated intersections between gender and nation. Through these imaginings, women are often pictured (literally through art/portraits and metaphorically) as 'mothers of the nation.' These insights, moreover, hold true for the Arab/Middle Eastern world. In Baron's (2005) study of Egyptian nationalism, for example, we are shown how the Egyptian nation was 'almost invariably' presented as female through artworks and photography.

National anthems, further, are one of the most obvious and easily recognizable symbols of the nation and national identity (Winstone and Witherspoon 2016). Understanding their importance, we can also see how altering their lyrics stands to become a 'big deal.'¹⁴³ Changing

¹⁴² The video was posted to *An-Nahar*'s official *Twitter* page: <https://mobile.twitter.com/Annahar/status/1192522773974966274>. (Accessed December 28, 2019).

¹⁴³ Canadians, for example, will remember the national debate that emerged in 2018 when the country sought to make its national anthem gender neutral. See for example: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180503-why-the-cost-of-equality-is-a-lot-lower-than-we-thought>. (Accessed October 10, 2020).

the lyrics to the national anthem, I argue, was more than a simple linguistic grammatical change. In doing so, Tueni and Samaha participate in a similar process whereby the nation is being re-gendered. By changing the (grammatical) borders of the nation, they sought to grant women *full* membership in an ‘imagined community’ that has – as discussed at length earlier in this work – long granted them only *partial* membership. Indeed, recall that Lebanese women cannot pass their nationality to their children or their foreign spouses. There is, I think, also a secondary project at work here. It is not simply that women are being included as *full* members of this newly imagined Lebanese nation. Rather, it appears that they are working to unite Lebanese women under the single nationalistic banner of ‘Lebanese women.’ I think this is a significant point given that Lebanese women’s interactions with the ‘nation’ (or more practically, the state) are heavily impacted not only by their economic class positioning, but also their sect – particularly in reference to the country’s personal status laws. It is, put more simply, an articulation of a collective struggle against patriarchy in Lebanon that works to impact the lives of *all* women.

The newspaper’s change of the anthem also recognizes that women have been important participants in the protests since they began. Indeed, one of the first viral clips that helped galvanize the protests depicted a woman kicking one of (then) Education Minister Akram Chehayeb’s bodyguards in the groin after he had fired his gun into the air to dispel the protesters surrounding the Minister’s convoy (SBS News 2019). Photographs circulated across social media of women and girls forming human chains to separate protesters from the army.¹⁴⁴ These are not isolated examples. Social media (*Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*) is also replete with

¹⁴⁴ See for example:
<https://www.facebook.com/BlogBaladi/photos/a.313146082033051/3026373480710284/?type=3&theater>.
 (Accessed December 30, 2019).

accounts and photos of women's bravery and leadership in the protests, making them very visible and active participants in the movement seeking to redefine the politics of their country.

Understanding the protests as the Lebanese people's collective response to a system that has systemically stripped them of their dignity for decades also requires us to recognize that this very same system has burdened women with a number of gender-specific barriers. Recalling the discussions in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, Lebanese women cannot pass citizenship to their children; Lebanon has amongst the lowest rates of female participation in formal politics in the world; weak legal provisions exist to protect women from domestic violence; marital rape is not criminalized; civil marriage is not offered; and issues relating to personal status (marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, inheritance, etc.) are handled exclusively within religious courts that – across sects – favour men in their judgements. It does not require a great stretch of the imagination, therefore, to see how each of these barriers subjects Lebanese women to very real forms of indignity – that can even vary across sectarian lines. Indeed, it also makes it easier to understand why Lebanese feminist activists have been very enthusiastic participants in the protests since they began. In one of the more organized demonstrations, for example, feminists marched from the American University in Beirut on the westside of the city to Martyr's Square – the epicenter of the protests – in downtown. The activists held signs bringing attention to sexual harassment/assault and chanted numerous demands for (women's) rights, including the right to pass citizenship to their children (Akour 2019). Such involvement highlights not only women's visibility within the protests, but the collective belief amongst Lebanese women (and men) that efforts to promote the establishment of a more equitable and prosperous society in Lebanon must include politico-legal measures that work towards the removal of the barriers faced by women.

Crystal Balls for Beirut

The protests that began in October 2019 were, by and large, unpredictable. Corruption and forms of inequality had existed in Lebanon for decades – if not centuries. The political structure of Lebanon’s Second Republic following the Civil War been unchanged since it was implemented in 1990 – only several months after my own birth. This means that academics, journalists, and the Lebanese themselves are exploring uncharted territory. Years from now, will we – as students of politics – look back and think of 2019 as the year that started the events leading to Lebanon’s comprehensive democratic revolution?

At the moment, this question, of course, has no answer. I, like much of the world, hoped that the protests suggested that a new dawn was breaking over Lebanon. However, the resistance of the current regime, displayed not only by its willingness to use force against its own people and the religious establishment’s continued support for the existing political elite, has worked to temper my initial enthusiasm. And as much as this realization may hurt, I am also a PhD student desperately working to complete her academic program. The short analysis I am able to offer here is insufficient to fully capture the nuances of the protest’s emergence and the numerous grievances of the Lebanese. As such, I task future academics and scholars with this work.

At the moment, however, two things seem clear to me. First, new media technologies will play an incredibly important role as these events continue to unfold in the coming months and years. The Lebanese turned to social media in the early weeks and months of the uprising – that I have discussed here – to organize, galvanize support, and share their aspirations with the world. It is likely, therefore, that whatever the future holds for Lebanon and its people, it will be documented on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*. Such openness, perhaps, could act as a possible ‘check’ on a state that has not only demonstrated its penchant for corruption, but also its

willingness to use violence against its own people. These sites are fruitful sources of raw data and public opinion that, I believe, demand academic analysis. Second, just as they have sought to connect themselves to national socio-political conversations and debates in years prior, it is also likely that Lebanese pop music celebrities will continue to use their talents and their massive social media reaches to express their views and promote forms of change and awareness raising in their home country. As rising Lebanese starlet Abeer Nehme sings in her hopeful chart-topping nationalistic single, *Hayda Watani (This is my Nation)*, “This is my nation, that I am living in. This is my past, this my love. He is my home, my parents, my children. He is my land [...]. He is coming, he is coming, he is coming...”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ The lyric video for *Hayda Watani* can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YeRUApyc88>. (Accessed January 22, 2020).

For Beirut
From my heart, peace to Beirut
 [...]
 She is wine, made from the people's soul
From their sweat, bread and jasmine
Then why does it now taste like fire and smoke?

- Lebanese Singer Fayrouz,
 “*Le Beirut.*”

Chapter Six: A Sad Song for Beirut

Introduction

While the year 2020 has been unkind to the whole of humanity, it has proven to be especially difficult for Lebanon and its people. Increased tensions and violence between protesters and police forces in Beirut and elsewhere ushered in the new year. The country's economic woes – inflation, debt, and unemployment – have continued to fester as Prime Minister Diab's government struggled to implement the economic reforms set by the *International Monetary Fund* as a condition for unlocking nearly \$10 billion USD in economic aid (Azhari 2020a). And, of course, the profound economic impact of the state-mandated lockdowns and business closures that began in March of 2020 to limit the spread of the pandemic-causing COVID-19 virus.

These harsh economic, political, and medical realities were then compounded by a devastating explosion at the Port of Beirut at 6:07PM on August 4, 2020. The blast was caused by nearly 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate that had been improperly stored in a warehouse at the Port since November 2013. The explosion caused an estimated \$15 billion USD in damage to the Port and surrounding areas of the city, claimed nearly 200 lives, and left an estimated 300,000 people homeless or displaced (Khodr 2020).

The heartbreak caused by these recent events in Lebanon is truly immeasurable. The explosion, it seemed, was the blow that finally – after decades of corruption and conflict – brought the country once known as the ‘Switzerland of the Middle East’ down to its knees. And while the Lebanese people knelt down to mourn their numerous collective losses, they have strengthened and once again unified their calls for governmental accountability and transparency. The protests that began in October 2019 have continued – even through the COVID-19 lockdowns, as images of protesters in facemasks circulated online. But in the days following the crippling explosion at the Port of Beirut, the protests have taken on a renewed sense of urgency, as frustrated and grieving Lebanese demand an explanation from their government. And just as they took to the streets and their sprawling social media accounts in the late fall of 2019 as the protests first took shape, Lebanese pop music celebrities once again stood beside their fellow Lebanese to express their anger and sorrow.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon, with specific attention to the gendered consequences of the lockdown, arguing that the lockdown created spaces for the further victimization of women. I also argue that while many of the posts and content uploaded by Lebanese pop stars during this period were largely devoid of explicit reference to violence against women or the ongoing

instability in Lebanon, this does not render them apolitical. I argue that many of their posts actually work to reproduce and enforce a (political) image of an idealized femininity with the power to do serious harm to women who fall outside its limited borders. In the second section, I discuss the August 4th, 2020 Port of Beirut explosion in greater detail and examine the significant role played by Lebanese pop stars in furthering the normalization of critique of the Lebanese state and female participation in politics.

COVID Crackdowns

On Friday, February 21, 2020, Lebanese Minister of Health Hamad Hasan confirmed that the first Lebanese patient had been diagnosed with COVID-19 shortly after returning to Lebanon from a trip to Iran (Yassine 2020b). Just three short weeks after the first case was confirmed in Lebanon, the country reported 93 confirmed cases of the virus (Yassine 2020b).

As the number of confirmed cases continued to grow, Lebanese officials followed the lead of other countries around the world and declared a state of medical emergency on the 15th of March of 2020 (Jamal 2020). The state of emergency, initially imposed for 15 days, required the closures of all non-vital economic sectors. Later that same day, Lebanese Minister of Information Manal Abdel Samad announced the closure of Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut and all other air, land, and seaports in the country to non-essential travel/business (Yassine 2020c). The state of emergency also required that all educational institutions, parks, cinemas, pubs, restaurants and all other non-essential public spaces were required to close as the state sought to curb the spread of the virus.

On March 21st, one month after Lebanon's first confirmed case of COVID-19, Prime Minister Hassan Diab appeared on national television, urging the Lebanese people to follow a curfew. The 'partial curfew' (as it was called in Lebanese media circles) would be in place from

7PM until 5AM and was set to come into effect on March 26th. While Diab pleaded with the Lebanese people to cooperate of their own volition, he did note that the military and police forces would assist the state in the enforcement of the curfew (Lebanese National News Agency 2020).¹⁴⁶

The lockdowns that began in late March proved to be effective in combating the spread of the virus and Lebanon, like a number of other countries (Canada, for example) began to loosen a number of its lockdown restrictions in May 2020. Hair salons, shops, restaurants, and places of worship had been allowed to reopen their doors in early May (with restrictions in place, such as a requirement for mask-wearing). The ease in restrictions, however, led to an alarming spike in cases, as more than 100 new cases were reported within the four days following the ease. Responding quickly, Prime Minister Diab's government re-imposed a 'total lockdown' that once again mandated the closure of non-essential sectors for several days from May 13 until May 18 (BBC News 2020a). In a speech, Prime Minister Diab lambasted Lebanese for failing to abide by social distancing protocols, accusing some of "negligence and a lack of responsibility." Diab's criticism of the Lebanese population, however, may have been ironic or, at the very least, unfair.

Long before the COVID-19 had infiltrated Lebanon's borders, the Lebanese economy was crippled by debt, inflation, and unemployment. It was, after all, profound negligence and irresponsibility on the part of Lebanese politicians for decades that compelled the people to take to the streets in October 2019. The state-mandated lockdowns that began in March 2020 have not

¹⁴⁶ Importantly, Lebanese federal and municipal authorities have been criticized for their 'discriminatory practices' regarding the enforcement of the curfews. Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in particular, were subjected to restrictions that exceed those imposed on Lebanese citizens. For example, Syrians in some municipalities in Lebanon, according to *Human Rights Watch* (2020a), were only allowed to leave their homes between 9AM and 1PM, creating an environment where refugees may be scared to leave their homes after 1PM, even to seek medical attention for the treatment of COVID-19 or other health/medical issues.

only delivered another blow to an already weak economy, but actually sent it into total free-fall. Many businesses were forced to close their doors forever, unemployment increased, and inflation has led to the doubling, tripling, and even quadrupling of prices for some basic foodstuffs – moving them even further away from the arms (and stomachs) of many Lebanese (Chehayeb and Chaya 2020). (For example, the price of ground beef has gone up dramatically since the pandemic began and now costs nearly \$25.00 USD/pound.) This dramatic increase in prices presented many ordinary Lebanese with another very serious problem: starvation.

“It’s no longer just about the demands for reform... of incremental change over time. It’s about the fear of going hungry, basically,” Beirut protester Gino Raidy told *The Guardian* (Downey et al. 2020). A viral video shows a protester arguing with a soldier telling him, “I’m hungry!” and the soldier replying, “I am more hungry than you are!” (Downey et al. 2020). “It’s been six months of us saying ‘Peaceful, peaceful!’” yelled a man at a protest. “The hungry no longer has anything to left to lose. He has nothing left to lose. What do they expect from someone who has nothing left to lose?” he continued (Dadouch 2020). In Tripoli, the people have taken out their frustration on banks, smashing windows and setting buildings on fire, protesting the cash withdrawal limits and cash shortages. Protesters have also thrown rocks at soldiers and police officers, who responded by firing tear gas, rubber bullets, and even live ammunition. These clashes have also resulted the death of a protester in Tripoli after he was shot by soldiers (*Human Rights Watch* 2020b).

Mindful of this context, it becomes easier to understand why many Lebanese have continued to protest – despite social distancing protocols, state-mandated curfews, and the state-wide lockdown (Chehayeb 2020). Poverty and the very real threat of hunger have, for many Lebanese, become much larger concerns than the possibility of contracting a flu-like virus (even

one as deadly as COVID-19). And while the protests have led to serious clashes between security/military forces and protesters in a number of towns and cities across Lebanon – Beirut, Saida, Tripoli, and Taalabaya, for example – many people still remained at home out of fear. As one protester in Tripoli told journalists: “I think if it weren’t for the coronavirus, people would have flooded the streets” (Chehayeb 2020).

Gendering the Virus

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, governments across the world urged their citizens to stay home. “Stay home, stay safe!” messages flooded the internet and quickly became the slogan used by international bodies and national governments alike.¹⁴⁷ Just like other governments around the world, Lebanese officials encouraged “citizens to remain home and not go out except out of extreme necessity” (*France24* 2020).

The walls of our homes – we were told – were our armour, shielding us from the virus. COVID-19 was an ‘outside’ threat, incapable of penetrating our armour because ‘inside’ we were safe. It was the act of leaving our homes that made us vulnerable and risked exposing us to danger. Indeed, this logic held true for many of us around the world. Yet in Lebanon, as we have discussed, domestic violence is already a serious problem. The real threat for many women, therefore, was not COVID-19, but inside their homes as they could – potentially – have been asked to lockdown with their abusers.

Shortly after the lockdown began in Lebanon in March 2020, news agencies began to report that incidents of domestic violence were on the rise. In an interview with *Al-Arabiya*, Ghida Anani, founder and director of Lebanese NGO *ABAAD* stated, “In cases where there is a

¹⁴⁷ See for example this messaging from the World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/southeastasia/outbreaks-and-emergencies/novel-coronavirus-2019/protective-measures/stay-healthy-at-home>. (Accessed July 15, 2020).

predisposition for violent behaviours, the frustration of being locked at home will likely cause violence to increase” (Quoted in Lewis 2020). She continued: “These are really life-threatening situations that women are living in. At least two women said they had received death threats from family members after showing flu-like symptoms consistent with coronavirus.”

Indeed, ABAAD, already known for leading attention-grabbing women’s rights campaigns, was quick to sound the alarm bells in Lebanon. Using a strategy similar to the one used during their ‘Undress 522’ campaign, ABAAD released a short video on their social media pages (*Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook*). The video begins with footage of quiet neighbourhood skylines (due to the lockdown) and pans to show clips of women painting letters on bedsheets with brushes and rollers. The video is overlain with the voice of a female narrator:

If you are quarantined in a safe home, don’t call it a prison because there are women who have really been held captive and are subjected to the ugliest kind of violence. But we are able to stop the lock-down from becoming a lock-up and to shed light on the black-out that hides the violence. [...] Let’s stand on our balconies on Thursday the 16th of April at 6PM next to every woman enduring domestic violence to share with them our support and to hang any blanket or piece of cloth with the hotline number that ABAAD has dedicated to help women imprisoned in their own homes. This time let us air our cleanest laundry to send a message of hope and solidarity!¹⁴⁸

The video (and images of painted sheets hanging on balconies across Lebanon following ABAAD’s call to action)¹⁴⁹ spread throughout Lebanese social media circles using the hashtag #حجر_مش_حجز (#lockdown_not_lockup).

Further, according to ABAAD’s own records of their hotlines for victims of abuse, the number of calls increased by 58.1% during February, March, and April of 2020 versus the same months in 2019.¹⁵⁰ Relatedly, Lebanese NGO Kafa also reported that the majority of women

¹⁴⁸ The short video can be viewed on ABAAD’s official *Twitter* page: <https://twitter.com/AbaadMENA/status/1249670577863999493>. (Accessed July 15, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ See for example: <https://www.annahar.com/article/1168243-العنف-بالبيت-لازم-يوقف>. (Accessed July 15, 2020).

¹⁵⁰ Source: <https://twitter.com/AbaadMENA/status/1251126936417550337/photo/1>. (Accessed July 15, 2020).

(60%) who contacted their hotlines to seek help for domestic violence in March of 2020 were doing so for the very first time, reporting incidents of violence or psychological abuse that had happened since the lockdown began (Lewis 2020). Also, recalling that instances of domestic violence often go unreported in Lebanon, it is possible that the situation is more grave than ABAAD and KAFA's statistics suggest.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated Lebanon's numerous (and very serious) economic troubles, but also created new opportunities and spaces for the victimization of women. While the whole of Lebanon stood to face the hardships brought about or worsened by COVID-19 – job loss, poverty, and even hunger – it was Lebanese women who were burdened with the additional stressor of violence in their homes.

Popstars and Pandemics

A central point made throughout this dissertation is that Lebanese pop stars are not only keenly aware of ongoing political debates within their country, but that they are largely unafraid to vocalize their views on these political issues. In doing so, they promote awareness and question the legitimacy of dominant narratives and norms relating to topics like family violence (as Elissa does), women's dress (as Haifa Wehbe and Myriam Klink do), and even same-sex relationships (as Maya Diab has).

The COVID-19 lockdown – requiring Lebanese from all walks of life to stay home, avoid family and friends, and abstain from participating in the normal social activities that once defined daily life – was a 'big deal.' And, of course, Lebanese music celebrities, also subject to the lockdown orders, took to their social media profiles to do what they do best: entertain and uplift their followers and fans.

Shortly after the lockdown order came from the Lebanese government in mid-March, diva Nancy Ajram teamed up with the Ministry of Information and the army to create a short clip encouraging the Lebanese people to stay home.¹⁵¹ Sitting on a sofa in what appears to be her music studio (a grand piano is visible in the background), she delivers an empathetic and serious message to the Lebanese people:

I know this period is difficult and I know what we are going through is not easy on us. To strengthen each other and to strengthen our selves, stay home.

The clip, featuring the hashtag #خليك_بالييت (#stay_home), was posted on the official *Instagram* page of the Lebanese Army and re-posted by Ajram to her own personal *Instagram* page.

In addition to her participation in the state-made clip, Ajram also shared a number of hopeful and happy videos and clips to her social media. She shared, for example, a viral video of an apartment building with its residents on their individual balconies dancing and singing along to her hit dance/party song, *Badna Nwalee El Jaw* (*We Want to Set the Scene on Fire*). Ajram captioned the video: “When we have the will, we face the most difficult circumstances, we can make life beautiful...And tomorrow will be better.”¹⁵² Ajram also used the hashtag #خليك_بالييت (#stay_home).

Similarly, pop star Elissa, who has a reputation for addressing politically charged and taboo themes in her music, teamed up with fellow pop star and close friend Haifa Wehbe to record a pandemic-inspired duet, *Hanghani Kaman Wa Kaman* (*We Will Sing Again and Again*). In the video clip for the song, Elissa is shown in her home (wearing pink silk pyjamas) reaching

¹⁵¹ The clip can be found on Ajram’s official *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-C2UIWHWhT/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

¹⁵² The clip can be found on Ajram’s official *Instagram* page: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9zoDfLn_CZ/. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

out to Wehbe over video call, who is also shown to be self-isolating in her home (also in pink pyjamas). In the clip, Elissa and Wehbe offer listeners a hopeful and soothing tune:

Life is like the sea and we're the ship
 We're searching for the shore to dock at
 But we try to forget
 And sing.
 /
 We'll live a lot and see
 We'll live under any circumstances
 We'll live and see,
 We'll live, let's go and live.¹⁵³

Importantly, Elissa also pledged to donate the allocated production budget for the song's music video to charity to further the fight against COVID-19 (*Arab News* 2020). Elissa also uploaded a clip from the video on her *Instagram* page, captioning the post: "Just released my video for #هِنَغْنِي_كَمَان_وَكَمَان featuring my [heart emoji] Haifa Wehbe we hope it will put a smile on your faces during these times as we get through it together. [...] (all the allocated budget this project was donated to charity) stay home and stay safe [kiss emoji]"¹⁵⁴

Lebanese pop starlet Myriam Fares also turned to her social media profiles to share her day-to-day life during the lockdown with her fans and followers. Fares' posts prominently feature clips and images of her happily playing and snuggling with her young son. For example, in late March, shortly after the state of medical emergency was declared in Lebanon, Fares shared a short video of her young son singing her a song in French for Mother's Day and her hugging and kissing him afterwards.¹⁵⁵ Fares has also shared multiple photos and videos of her very luxurious home – with its private rooftop pool, private workout studio with a fully equipped

¹⁵³ The video clip for the song can be found on *YouTube*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3WVyu64kCg>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

¹⁵⁴ The post can be viewed on Elissa's official *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-2VMa1J-Uh/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

¹⁵⁵ The post can be viewed on Myriam Fares' official *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-CfFsFINGH/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

home gym, and very spacious kitchen. Many of the star's under-lockdown posts, like other celebrities, featured the hashtag خليك_بالييت (#stay_home).

Indeed, celebrities using their enormous collective reach (via social media) to disseminate information about COVID-19 and the need for social distancing and isolation measures is invaluable. If the protests that began in October 2019 have demonstrated anything it is that many Lebanese are distrustful of and (understandably) harbour resentment towards government officials. In this context, a popular celebrity like Nancy Ajram calmly addressing the Lebanese people, asking that they remain at home may, in fact, be more persuasive than, for example, President Michel Aoun making the same appeal. And, there is certainly value in the efforts of pop stars trying to do what they do best – entertain and amuse their audiences – at a time of heightened stress and anxiety brought about by an unprecedented state-wide lockdown.

Interestingly, very few (if any) pop stars made explicit mention of the ongoing protests throughout the country, the worsening economic crisis, or even the increase in domestic violence reports. Their posts during the lockdown appear to downplay the seriousness of the socio-political situation in Lebanon, and present COVID-19 as something that can be patiently 'waited out' from the comfort of their homes. But this 'silence' does not render pop stars' posts from this period apolitical. Rather, I argue the opposite.

Celebrities shared images of their large walk-in closets filled with expensive designer shoes, clothing, and handbags.¹⁵⁶ They posted photos of extravagant birthday parties¹⁵⁷ and their children's well-stocked playrooms.¹⁵⁸ And, of course, they happily danced around their homes in

¹⁵⁶ The post can be viewed on Myriam Fares' official *Instagram* page: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_sBuImlw6S/. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

¹⁵⁷ The post can be viewed on Nancy Ajram's official *Instagram* page: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_U5wvFHthg/. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

¹⁵⁸ The post can be viewed on Nancy Ajram's official *Instagram* page: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-AaZfqWms/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

their pink silk pyjamas. But many Lebanese were not dancing; they were not joyful; and had little (if anything) to celebrate. And it is the juxtaposition of these socio-political realities against the social media posts of celebrities that not only evidence important class differences, but also (once again) highlight the ‘politics of pop music.’

While Myriam Fares cooked and shared some of her family’s recipes on *Instagram*, many other Lebanese were compelled to protest in the streets during a pandemic because they could no longer afford basic foodstuffs. While Nancy Ajram ate cake with her husband to celebrate their daughter’s birthday, many other Lebanese women desperately called *ABAAD* and *KAFA* because their homes were unsafe. The actions of Fares and Ajram when taken alone are, in fact, quite unremarkable. Cooking and preparing meals at home and celebrating important family occasions are actually normal (even happy) parts of human life. But as discourse analysis reminds us, it is not only what photographs or language directly communicate that is significant, but also what they take for granted. Thus, when Ajram’s and Fares’ posts are placed beside the images of the ongoing poverty and abuse experienced by other Lebanese, they no longer become ordinary.

In fact, it is through juxtaposition that we can better understand the sort of aspirational femininity they work to further entrench. It is, however, a femininity that exists at narrowly defined intersections of class, heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. That few other Lebanese women – across sects – also exist at that intersection, I believe, renders their femininity highly exclusionary. (This point is made even more salient by recent statistics that now suggest that nearly half of the Lebanese population now lives below the poverty line [*Al-Jazeera* 2020c].) And if we recall the discussion of previous chapters, it is often women who are asked to pay the heavy costs associated with deviation away from norms associated with associated with appropriate femininity, such as seeking a divorce or seeking to flee a violent/toxic relationship. It

does not, I believe, require a great stretch of the imagination to see how further normalizing and empowering the logics of heterosexual marriage and motherhood, for example, stand to cause very serious harm to LGBTQ+ women, or women who are pressured (by religiously oriented family law and custom) to remain in violent situations for fear of losing their children, or even women who simply choose not to have children.

Heartbreak in Beirut

I have many fond memories from my time in Lebanon while I conducted my fieldwork during the summer of 2017: walks to the *SeaSweet* patisserie for pistachio ice cream cones with my cousins; drinking mint iced tea at *Petit Café* beside the famous Raouche rocks; marvelling at the splendour of the *Mohammad Al-Amin* Mosque and the intricate Arabic calligraphy that graces its largest interior *qubba* (dome in Arabic); and demanding that my cousin Ibrahim immediately find a parking spot, despite busy Friday afternoon downtown traffic, all because I wanted to see the *Sahat al-Shouhada* (Martyr's Square in Arabic) statue up close. Each of these memories – and the many, many more that I will treasure for the remainder of my life – took place in Beirut.

On August 4th, 2020 tragedy struck Beirut and many of the beautiful seaside streets and walkways I explored with my cousins were destroyed. In what became one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, nearly half of the city sustained damage and the areas near the blast site completely levelled. So powerful was the blast that neighbours in Turkey, Israel, and Syria also felt its tremors and people in Cyprus (about 240KM away) reported being able to hear it (BBC News 2020b; Bressan 2020). The epicenter of the blast was a warehouse at the Port of Beirut and was caused by 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate that had been improperly stored there since 2013 when it was seized by Lebanese port authorities. The shipment of chemicals, it

was later released, originated in Georgia and was ultimately destined for Mozambique to be used in the creation of mining explosives (Polglase 2020).

Responding to the crisis, the Lebanese government declared a two-week state of emergency, as the crippled state sought to make sense of the disaster. The blast, in addition to causing losses of upwards of \$15 billion USD (Hussain and Cohn 2020), also claimed the lives of more than 200 people (Baloch 2020). Some 300,000 people were also left with homes that sustained so much damage, they were rendered unfit to live in, leaving these people displaced or homeless. The blast also destroyed Lebanon's only grain silo, ruining 15,000 tonnes of grain (Francis and El Dahan 2020), leaving the country of about 6 million people, with about a month's supply. While grain shipments are on their way to Lebanon (Francis and El Dahan 2020), allowing the country to avoid a very serious famine, the port blast destroyed Lebanon's supply chain, meaning other shipments must now be re-routed to smaller, less-equipped ports in Tripoli, Saida, Sleata, and Jiyeh. This altered supply chain also stands to have serious consequences for Lebanon's food security. Lebanon, prior to the explosion, imported anywhere between 60 and 80% of its food supply, and 60% of all imports were handled through the port in Beirut. And, following this, it can be reasonably concluded that if foodstuffs are now going to be more difficult to import into Lebanon – via smaller ports throughout the country – the price of food will continue to rise, moving it (yet again) further away from the hands (and stomachs) of many Lebanese people.

Adding to Lebanon's many problems, in the days following the blast, Lebanese health authorities began recording sharp increases in COVID-19 cases. The explosion damaged a number of Beirut hospitals, leading to overcrowding in other hospitals throughout the city as the wounded flooded into emergency rooms (*Al-Jazeera* 2020d). This overcrowding, combined with

search and rescue efforts and the mass protests that erupted following the blast, have created a perfect environment for the spread of COVID-19. This concern prompted the Lebanese government to issue a mandatory two-week lockdown beginning on August 21st to help curb the surge of cases. The new lockdown imposed a curfew from 6AM to 6PM, required the closure of shopping malls, beaches, night clubs, and completely banned social gatherings.

On top of being required to cope with the tremendous burdens of financial insecurity, state-wide political corruption (discussed briefly in the previous chapter), and a deadly global pandemic, the Lebanese people were then forced to watch much of their beautiful seaside capital city reduced to rubble. The pain and heartbreak felt by Lebanese people everywhere – within Beirut, the rest of Lebanon, and even within the diaspora community – was immeasurable. It was as though their hearts had been torn from their chests.

Further, if the implementation of an oppressive tax on a mobile messaging application was enough to spark mass protests in October 2019, the reduction of much of their capital city to rubble and ash sparked something far worse. In the days following the explosion, mass protests once again erupted across Lebanon, as the people demanded the downfall of their ruling class – whose negligence and incompetence had literally brought their country to ruins. Responding to the public fury, the government of recently appointed PM Hassan Diab resigned on August 10, 2020. In his televised resignation speech, Diab stated, “Today we follow the will of the people, to hold accountable those responsible for this disaster that has been in hiding for seven years and their desire for real change from the corrupt, destructive state, state of brokerages and theft, to a state of law, justice, and transparency, a state that respects its citizens.”¹⁵⁹ President Michel Aoun

¹⁵⁹ The full Arabic-language speech can be found here (with an English translation): <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/08/10/Read-full-resignation-speech-of-Lebanese-PM-Hassan-Diab>. (Accessed August 11, 2020).

accepted Diab's resignation, but asked his government to remain in office as 'caretakers' during the current troubled time (*Al-Jazeera* 2020e). Starlet Maya Diab, who had been a very vocal and active critic of the Lebanese state on *Twitter* since the explosion in Beirut (as we will see below), took to her page to comment on the news of PM Diab's (quasi)resignation: "Good riddance #goodbye #beirut_is_crying #beirut_isin_ourhearts"¹⁶⁰

As news of PM Diab's resignation continued to spread, media outlets began speculating as to whether or not President Aoun would follow suit. In a recorded interview with French news outlet *BFM*, Aoun announced that he would not step down as Lebanese President, even amidst the ongoing protests:

[My resignation] is impossible, because this would lead to a power vacuum. The government resigned. Let's imagine that I was to resign. Who would ensure the continuity of power? [...] If I were to resign, one would need to organize elections right away. But the current situation in the country does not allow the organization of such elections (quoted in Wojazer and Sullivan 2020).

The days following PM Diab's resignation were witness to an escalation in violence across the country, as protesters were caught in violent clashes with security forces. On September 1st, thousands of protesters gathered at Martyr's Square in Beirut, waving Lebanese flags as they denounced corrupt politicians. These protesters were met with tear gas cannisters and baton-wielding riot police. As the situation escalated, a number of protesters sought to storm the heavily fortified Parliament building in Beirut's downtown. That these protests took place on the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Greater Lebanon under French Mandate authorities, also offered tragic closure to tale of Lebanon's first 100 years as a country.¹⁶¹ In the words of one protester in Beirut: "The first century has been nothing but wars, foreign occupation,

¹⁶⁰ Diab's *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1292902470650388480>. (Accessed October 12, 2020). In running text, I have tried to translate the hashtags into English.

¹⁶¹ As noted in the introduction to this work, Greater Lebanon was declared on September 1, 1920.

poverty, corruption, emigration, sectarian divisions, and now this explosion that killed and wounded thousands” (quoted in *Al-Jazeera* 2020f).

Indeed, as unrest continued, Lebanon’s Parliament felt the immense pressure to appoint another Prime Minister to fill the void created by PM Diab’s resignation, thereby creating some semblance of stability and order in the country. But in addition to this domestic pressure, French President Emmanuel Macron also pressed Lebanese officials to quickly appoint a new government, as a condition for receiving foreign aid (Azhari 2020b). On the 31st of August, Lebanese Parliament confirmed the appointment of former Lebanese Ambassador to Germany Mustapha Adib as the new designated Lebanese Prime Minister (Qiblawi 2020). Unlike his predecessor, Adib received broad support for the position in Parliament, even across sectarian lines (including the Christian *Free Patriotic Movement*, the Sunni Muslim *Future Movement*, and the Shia Muslim politico-military organization *Hezbollah*). In his short confirmation speech, Adib said, “There is no time for talk, promises and wishes. It is a time for action” (quoted in Qiblawi 2020).

While Adib pledged to take the ‘action’ necessary to begin what will be Lebanon’s long journey to economic and political reform – including resuming negotiations with the *International Monetary Fund* to unlock the \$10 billion USD promised to Lebanon pending serious reforms to both the electricity and financial sectors – many found his appointment somewhat underwhelming. On *Twitter*, for example, Adib’s hasty appointment was referred to as a ‘gift for Macron.’¹⁶² Another commentator on *Twitter* sought to draw parallels between Adib and Diab, as both men hold PhDs, taught at Lebanese universities, and were relatively unknown to the majority of Lebanese at the time of their appointments: “Mustapha Adib seems like

¹⁶² See for example: <https://twitter.com/KarimMakdisi/status/1300114097757917190>. (Accessed September 2, 2020).

another Hassan Diab...’’¹⁶³ Sami Atallah of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies summarized the underwhelming sentiment surrounding Adib’s appointment:

This is another attempt to beautify the system with a new face that very few people know and project the image that something is going to change. I doubt anything will, because we’ll see how this government will be formed with representatives of different political parties, just like Diab (quoted in Qiblawi 2020).

The fact that Adib’s surname is even an acronym for Diab’s, too, is a strange coincidence that appears to add to the feeling of ‘sameness’ surrounding his appointment.

These feelings of sameness proved to be somewhat prophetic and Adib’s Prime Ministership proved to be even more short-lived than Diab’s. Only a few short weeks after his appointment, Adib issued his resignation on September 26, 2020. Citing the difficulty in forming a cabinet, Adib “apologized” to the Lebanese people for not continuing the task for forming a government (Redondo 2020). His resignation was quickly met with disappointment on social media. And contempt for the Lebanese state swirled – even amongst the popstars discussed throughout this thesis. Maya Diab took to *Twitter* to express her feelings about Adib’s failure to form a government and resignation. In a series of *tweets*, she lambasts the Lebanese state and the ‘French initiative’ (which can be understood as Adib’s appointment as a means of appeasing French President Macron). She says: “Today the Lebanese people are all thinking about how we will run out of food, water, diesel, wheat, and power and every necessity of life. And every one of us thinking what can we do to survive in the time when our state does not want to do anything...”¹⁶⁴

As a very clear indication of the old regime’s *stickiness*, a familiar face was brought in to replace Adib as Prime Minister (designate). On the 22nd of October, Saad Hariri was selected by

¹⁶³ Source: <https://twitter.com/ramezdagher/status/1300095518857723905>. (Accessed September 2, 2020).

¹⁶⁴ Diab’s *tweet* can be found here: <https://mobile.twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1309905633739710464>. (Accessed October 10, 2020).

the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies to form another government and select his cabinet (Azhari 2020c). The months since Hariri's appointment, however, have proven to be incredibly challenging. Shortly after his return to the same office he vacated a year prior, relations between Hariri and President soured, devolving into childish bickering across national and international news platforms. A video was leaked of President Aoun referring to Hariri as a "liar," and Hariri responded with a thinly veiled *tweet* containing a Bible verse about "cheating" (Middle East Monitor 2021). As I write now – in March 2021 – Lebanese political elite have yet to form a government and their quarreling is set against the backdrop of continued protests in Beirut and elsewhere (Mroue 2021).

While much has been written in news reports over the past several months about this bickering, the effects of this prolonged delay have been very serious. For example, Lebanon now faces being plunged into total darkness – literally. The state-owned electricity company, *Electricity of Lebanon* (EDL), had been operating on a loan approved in the 2020 budget. These funds have now all but dried out, leaving EDL desperately strapped for cash to pay for fuel imports (Al-Arabiya News 2021). This placed the EDL in a position where it actually had to shut down power plants in late March because there was no fuel to operate them. Following this shutdown, as a stopgap measure, Parliament quickly approved a \$200 million USD loan to EDL keep the lights on for another two months. A new federal budget – including funds for the EDL – cannot be approved without the formation of a government.

To be sure, these developments – or lack thereof – have also not gone unnoticed by Lebanon's musical starlets. In February 2021, Elissa became the first Arab singer to launch her own podcast. In a recent episode, she opens up and discusses her view on the current instability in Lebanon. "I will not be quiet about the injustice that follows and impacts us as citizens from

the criminality of the corrupt regime, because Lebanon has taught me that I am a free human being and I have openness to other people.”¹⁶⁵ She goes on to explain that Beirut has been destroyed by “tyrants” seven different times, but none have managed to outlive the cedar. (The cedar is a reference to the Lebanese cedar – the symbol on the Lebanese flag.) Similarly, pop star Maya Diab posted a *tweet* expressing her “solidarity with [her] family in the streets.”¹⁶⁶ She was referring to the protesters who had been blocking major roads to Beirut for seven straight days in early March.

Pop Music Takes the Stage for Beirut

My reader will recall that the central argument of this thesis is that Lebanese pop music is not only connected to Lebanese politics, but that some pop singers use their platforms to promote various forms of social and political change. Given the incredible significance of the explosion at the Port of Beirut, it was also unsurprising that a number of Lebanon’s biggest stars – just like millions of other Lebanese – also sought to express their heartbreak and frustration.

Indeed, as news of the explosion spread, social media was immediately flooded with *tweets*/posts from angered users demanding answers and accountability from the Lebanese government. Only several hours after the blast, for example, starlet Maya Diab took to *Twitter* to make her contempt for the Lebanese political establishment known:

There is one person who is controlling the country from the underground and he has continued doing so until he has put us and the country underground [i.e., the country and its people have hit rock bottom]. #government [is just] talking dogs and animals. A state...what state... is this a state to begin with[?] Crying is not enough... we want you

¹⁶⁵ The article discussing Elissa’s podcast and her critique of Lebanon’s politicians can be found here: <https://www.aljadeed.tv/arabic/entertainment/stars-news/08042021>. (Accessed April 9, 2021).

¹⁶⁶ The Tweet can be found here: <https://twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1368865346619400193>. (Accessed March 12, 2021).

[i.e., political officials] as corpses and only corpses [i.e., current political officials would be more useful to the Lebanese people as dead bodies than as politicians].¹⁶⁷

In addition to these harsh words, Diab has continued to use her multiple social media platforms as a base for vocalizing her criticism of the Lebanese state to her millions of followers/fans, including posting photos of herself marching in the streets of Beirut with fellow Lebanese as they collectively mourn the ‘death’ of their country.¹⁶⁸

Similarly, pop celebrity Najwa Karam also took to her social media to express her anger, uploading a scathing (audio) message for Lebanese politicians:

We have two headlines. The first, is as though nothing happened; the second, it is as though a lot had happened. Yes, a lot happened, and it is very big. You killed us and you killed the country and acted as if nothing happened. You extinguished our goals and our dreams and our future and acted as if nothing happened. You drove us and our children from our homes, and out of our minds and acted as if nothing happened. You robbed us and stole from us and you bankrupted us and acted as if it were nothing. And with all audacity, they told us that we would get used to it. I hope you all get used to being blind¹⁶⁹ [...]. We are not your property, we are not your experiments, nor are we a place for you to realize your dreams. The revolution should enter your homes to make you feel the way we feel. That is if you have feelings to begin with, you children of snakes. You filled our hospitals and busied our psychiatrists. You killed us while we were still alive, you people without conscience. You traded the smell of dandelions and *za'atar* [a Middle Eastern spice blend] for the smell of the bodies of children and our families. And you are still fighting for power. Drop dead and leave, a lot has happened. It is as though it is raining, how are you able to belittle us. How can you belittle our intelligence and our souls? We do not understand how, and if you do not understand it is a problem. And if you do understand, it is an even bigger problem.¹⁷⁰

In her brutally honest and anger-fueled message to the Lebanese political establishment, Karam not only attacks the moral bankruptcy of the Lebanese political establishment, but the *ease* and *comfort* with which they have “robbed” and “stolen from” the Lebanese people. They acted “as if

¹⁶⁷ Source: <https://twitter.com/mayadiab/status/1290720759510380545>. (Accessed September 3, 2020). Additionally, while Diab did not specify who the ‘one person controlling the country’ was, it is likely that she is referring to Hassan Nasrallah of *Hezbollah*, given the somewhat clandestine and controversial nature of the organization.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, this *Instagram* post made by Diab: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDpJ9s8nYiS/>. (Accessed September 2, 2020).

¹⁶⁹ Wishing blindness upon someone, in Lebanese slang Arabic, is often used as a serious insult/curse.

¹⁷⁰ Source: <https://twitter.com/najwakaram/status/1291059068719845383>. (Accessed September 3, 2020).

it were nothing.” In this way, Karam seems to address the flagrancy of political corruption in post-war Lebanon and the morally deficient elites for dismissing their own behaviour as it were “nothing.” She claims that the “revolution should enter the homes” of Lebanon’s political elites, suggesting that they have been largely shielded from the country’s hardships, despite having caused them. She goes on to point out that even through all the hardships they appear to have caused the Lebanese people, they continue to “fight for power” amongst themselves. Her lengthy message, moreover, was not only commented on and shared by other Lebanese celebrities, it had accumulated nearly 500,000 views and reposted to *Twitter* along over three thousand times.

While scholars of popular culture (Grossberg 1992, 2; Korczynski 2014, 9; Shea 1999, 4), remind us that it is difficult (if not impossible) to measure the extent to which Diab’s or Karam’s posts/words may directly inform the political activities or actions of their Lebanese followers, we can argue that their posts work to further spread open critique of the Lebanese state and its political officials. They are – just as *ABAAD* did with their campaign against Article 522 – airing the dirty laundry of the Lebanese state out for the world to see. The fact that her post has been viewed and shared so many times, too, offers evidence for her views’ resonance with the Lebanese. She seems to have given voice to their feelings.

In the Lebanese context, this sort of open critique could be useful. As noted in the introduction to this work, the Lebanese news media is – for the most part – largely controlled by sectarian political parties, effectively reducing much of its critical capacity as a site for objective political debate and reporting. This has paralleled the deliberate and strategic weakening of internal watchdog institutions to prevent governmental corruption. In this context, very public (or internationalized) conversations about the state’s various failures, therefore, could act as an important ‘check’ on governmental officials by raising awareness about the state’s actions.

Karam and Diab have sought to do this through their social media pages – as Lebanese citizens openly vocalizing criticism of the serious failures of their state officials.

Conclusion

The physical and emotional pain the Lebanese people have been forced to endure these past several months are beyond measure: a devastating pandemic; an explosion that decimated much of their historic capital city; governmental stagnation; and the apparent return of the old regime. The year 2020 has, indeed, proven to be unkind to the Lebanon and its people.

I sought to examine these recent socio-political events in greater detail, arguing that Lebanese pop music stars once again connected themselves to important political events and debates in Lebanon. I began with a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon, its economic impact, and the very serious gendered consequences of the subsequent lockdown as reports of domestic violence began to rise across the country. While celebrities encouraged their fans and followers to stay home, their posts did not address the harsh economic and domestic realities experienced by many others in the country. These omissions, I argued, did not render their posts apolitical. Rather, they displayed a highly exclusionary nature of femininity that stood to cause harm to those many women who are unable to achieve it.

In the second section of this chapter, I explored the August 4, 2019 explosion at the Port of Beirut, the mass protests that erupted following the explosion, the subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Diab, and the reappearance of Saad Hariri. I argued that pop stars once again were unafraid to vocalize their views on current events in Lebanon. Najwa Karam and Maya Diab both delivered scathing critiques of the Lebanese political establishment, likening them to the ‘children of snakes’ and to ‘talking dogs.’ While I concede that the direct consequences of their comments are difficult to measure, their words and willingness to openly vocalize such

strong opinions could act as a ‘check’ on governmental officials by raising awareness of state actions.

I prefer to be a dreamer among the humblest, with visions to be realized, than lord among those without dreams and desires.

– Khalil Gibran,
Lebanese Poet

Conclusion

Introduction

As I sat at my parents' dining table preparing to write the introductory lines to this thesis in the early weeks of 2020, I recall feeling awe-struck by the courage of the Lebanese people. I was proud to be Lebanese. I felt connected – in a strange, remote way – to what I believed to be an inspired, grassroots movement that involved the whole of Lebanon, including its ultra-glamorous pop music divas. In those early weeks, Lebanese shared a common goal: they wanted their politicians to be held accountable for failing to protect Lebanon's deteriorating socio-political and economic institutions. I admired the bravery of Lebanese women who, since the earliest days of the uprising, had taken to the streets (and their social media accounts) to highlight that oppression and inequality in Lebanon extend beyond economics and forms of political corruption. That a number of these women were Lebanese pop music celebrities, too, offered support for the central argument of my work: Lebanese pop music celebrities worked to promote changes in Lebanese gender and sexuality norms. They appear to be very aware of the (social) politics of their country and lend their sprawling social media accounts (and even musical outputs) to important national and regional conversations, such as those concerning domestic violence or LGBTQ+ rights, and in doing so, promote various forms of change.

Thesis Summary

My PhD dissertation spawned from my view that politics – the human struggles for access to and control over various forms of power – occurs in locales outside the formal

institutions of politics. The political world we, as human beings, inhabit is more than our brick-and-mortar legislatures, our robust legal codes, and our constitutions; rather, it becomes fully visible each and every time we engage in conversations and debates about who we are and what we each want to become. In my MA thesis, I examined how these debates took place within the context of a *Barbie*-like Islamic children's doll named, *Fulla*. Years later, I explored how Lebanon's pop stars also sought to participate in these sorts of conversations.

I began my exploration of the connections between Lebanese pop music and gender by explaining my project's methodology. I explained the details of my fieldwork in Lebanon, the interviews I conducted, and – significantly – the interviews I was not able to conduct. To supplement my data, therefore, I turned to multi-modal discourse analysis. Multi-modal discourse analysis makes the case for the expansion of traditional discourse analysis, arguing for the inclusion of forms of non-textual forms of communication, such as photographs and videos. This expansion allowed me to examine the photographs, even videos, uploaded to social media by Lebanese musical celebrities – and critically examine what information they communicated to audiences/followers. I also turned to the practice of researcher reflexivity. Reflexivity problematizes ideas of researcher neutrality and authorial silence, arguing that researchers are active participants in the social worlds they study as they simultaneously change and are changed by them. In my case, this meant acknowledging and accounting for my unique positionality relative to my research's subject matter. Specifically, I explored how three different facets of my identity – gender, whiteness, and *wastas* – impacted my research and fieldwork experiences, including the securing of interviews.

Mindful of these methodological concerns, I then sought to address a number of important theoretical concerns. Through a discussion of high and low culture, I explained how

culture itself is a somewhat slippery term for social theorists. Understanding this, I discuss how – perhaps – the concept of meanings may be more useful. I discuss how the meanings attached to various cultural practices/objects/etc. are never fixed and always subject to debate. This line of thought, I continue, also demands that we also appreciate the complexity of human beings, the social worlds they create, and the diversity of their experiences within them. Building on this, I draw from the theoretical insights of (feminist) intersectionality. Theoretically, intersectionality seeks to directly challenge and problematize the homogenizing and exclusionary tendencies of ‘universalist’ feminisms that presuppose the existence of a stable category of ‘woman.’ In doing so, intersectionality maintains that women’s experiences exist at ‘intersections’ between numerous categories of identity, including race, gender, class, sexuality, geography, etc. Feminist scholars of the Arab world/Middle East, too, have affirmed these insights in their own work. While shared experiences may exist, a fair representation of the lives of women in the region must be attentive to the impact of history, class, religion, and kinship ties. By citing an experience from my fieldwork, I also sought to draw parallels between theory and method. I argue that the insights of intersectionality theory are complementary to the method of researcher reflexivity.

Drawing from my own experiences as the daughter of a Lebanese father, I also sought to pay careful attention to how I discuss Lebanese women. In my third chapter, I explore the complicated relationship between gender and the Lebanese state, arguing that patriarchy largely defines and structures this relationship. I explore the gendered – and discriminatory – nature of Lebanon’s nationality law and the country’s complicated network of personal status laws that are mediated through its multitude of religious courts. To this end, we can see how Lebanese women not only experience the state (and its various) apparatuses as *women*, but also have differential

experiences that are heavily dependent on their sectarian affiliations. While Lebanese women have adopted a number of strategies for resisting these dynamics, namely the case-by-case approach famously advocated by Laure Moghaizel, the Lebanese political and religious elite have proven incredibly resistant to change. Thus, while women's advocates have secured important rulings that have improved the lives of women, such as access to contraceptives and the removal of harmful 'marry-your-rapist' legislation, change to personal status law or nationality law have remained elusive. Through a discussion of earlier scholarly insights about the NCLW, I also endeavour to demonstrate how the newly created Ministry for Women's Affairs is unlikely to become a serious channel through which women's rights advocacy can penetrate the state. This situation is further complicated by the historically low rates of female participation in politics, a phenomenon that is – at least partly – explained by the 'father-to-son' inherited nature of Lebanese political offices. Recently, however, women's rights campaigns, while still demonstrative of the 'bit by bit' strategy used in Lebanon, has offered more evidence for the significance of the internet in social activism. I then turned my attentions towards the relationship between popular music and calls for social and political change, pointing out important examples of music's connection to cases of socio-political upheavals in the Arab Middle East. These connections, I suggest, only mattered to the extent that music could secure an audience. In the age of social media and online music streaming, music has not only secured an audience, but expanded it dramatically. Arab pop music celebrities now boast followers numbering in the tens of millions on multiple social media platforms. Using the example of pop starlet Elissa's video clip about breast cancer, I suggest that this massive reach can possibly work to transform pop music celebrities into promoters of social change as they raise awareness about taboo issues.

My discussion of gender politics and social change was used to offer my reader the very important social and historical context necessary for the exploration of the intersections between popular music and gender politics in Lebanon. I asked how pop stars construct and display aspects of their femininity and directly engage with and participate in Lebanese politics. As a genre, Arab pop is criticized for being (supposedly) apolitical, promoting rampant consumerism, and – perhaps most controversially – greater degrees of sexual openness. While Haifa Wehbe and Myriam Klink are two pop starlets often singled out for their ‘sexual openness,’ each has attached themselves to and vocalized their views on regional and domestic politics. Wehbe, for her part, has vocalized (what I interpreted to be) strong sectarian support for *Hezbollah* and its controversial leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Klink, too, has long been a vocal critic of Lebanese politics, corruption, and the country’s crumbling domestic infrastructure. Elissa, for her part, however, has tackled a tabooer topic: domestic violence. By contextualizing Elissa’s video within the politics of/views on the issue in Lebanon, I suggest that Elissa is shedding light on an issue that is still largely hidden away within ‘the family’ and within religious courts. In addition to the issue of domestic violence, the issue of LGBTQ+ rights in Lebanon (as with much of the world – arguably) also remains very taboo. Indeed, this view explained why starlet Maya Diab found herself at the center of controversy when she dared to support the community in Lebanon. What makes celebrity political activism so significant is not only that it serves to connect popular culture to politics, but that each of these celebrities (and others like them) have massive online followings and fanbases. At first glance, this heightened attention and awareness-raising may seem beneficial. My interview participants, however, were quick to qualify this observation, suggesting that it can actually be harmful if the tactics are *too* controversial, such as wearing lingerie while simultaneously championing bodily autonomy. I also examine cases of celebrities

who work not in opposition of dominant (gendered and patriarchal) narratives, but in support of them.

Najwa Karam, for example, is *supporter* of domestic violence, arguing that she ‘deserved’ to experience violence because it ‘broke her stubbornness.’ This (bizarre) stance, I suggest, works in support of the status quo and aligns Karam with the operation of patriarchy in Lebanon. Nancy Ajram, has very often actively avoided controversy and politics. Yet, Ajram is very open with her fans (and audiences) about her beautiful family and happy marriage, often posting smiling photos of her children and husband. In doing so, she actually connects herself not to politics in the ‘formal’ sense, but to politicized discourses, such as the *normalization* of heterosexuality, thereby benefiting from them and becoming complicit in their reproduction.

An important argument made throughout this thesis has been that the opinions and viewpoints of Lebanese pop stars matter, in part, because of their massive social media followings. Indeed, with a few taps on her mobile phone, a megastar like Nancy Ajram can reach an audience of nearly 15 million on *Twitter* and another 30 million on *Instagram* – an audience that far surpasses that of Lebanon’s Prime Minister and President combined. The power and capabilities of these social media networks in the Arab world was demonstrated in the early months of 2011 as Arab Spring protesters used *Facebook* as one of their tools to rally support, organize, and document the movement. In the years since, however, it seems that some Arab governments have still not yet fully appreciated the power of social media and the internet. In the Fall of 2019, Lebanese – like some of their predecessors in 2011 – turned to social media (*Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*) to galvanize support for their anti-corruption protests and articulate their concerns to the world. And just as they have done with other political issues in Lebanon, many pop stars turned to their social media accounts to pledge their support for the

movement and those protesting in the streets of Beirut and other municipalities across the country. Importantly, the protests, while beginning as a response to oppressive taxation measures, quickly took on a gendered dimension, that not only recognized the hardships faced by Lebanese women, but also their important role in the protests themselves.

Finally, I examined the intersection between pop music, gender, and more recent major events in Lebanon: COVID-19 and the Beirut Port explosion. First, while the scope of COVID-19 was international, the virus presented Lebanon with a number of unique obstacles. Prior to the pandemic, Lebanon was already dealing with the worst economic and debt crisis the country had ever seen. The state mandated lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus further exacerbated this already tense situation and job losses and business closures increased. But in addition to these high economic costs, Lebanese women were presented with a unique obstacle. COVID-19 created an environment where women could have been forced to lockdown inside unsafe, abusive households – a serious concern in light of our earlier discussion of domestic violence. And while some popstars worked with the Lebanese state to promote ‘stay at home’ messaging, others chose to do what popstars do best: amuse their fans. They uploaded uplifting and entertaining posts, songs, and photos of their homes and large, walk-in closets. In doing so, they failed to make reference to the ongoing economic crisis or protests in the streets across the country. This lack of direct political commentary, however, does not detach them or their posts from politics. Rather, these posts – displaying their wealth, children, and happy marriages cooperate to create an aspirational image of femininity and womanhood. When this image, further, is juxtaposed against the realities of poverty and violence experienced by many Lebanese women, it not only highlights important class differences, but the ‘politics of pop,’ whereby pop music works to further normalize an image of femininity that includes politicized traits like

heterosexuality, wealth, motherhood, etc. Second, following the devastating explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, Lebanese popstars (like many other Lebanese) turned to social media to express their grief and frustration. Starlets posted scaring critiques of Lebanese political officials, calling them murders and thieves. In Lebanon, where unchecked political authority in the post-war era has brought corruption to new heights, this sort of wide-open critique could be useful. Celebrities can use their massive social media reaches to ‘air Lebanon’s dirty laundry’ out for the world to see. In doing so, they can act as a ‘check’ on governmental authority by raising awareness about the state’s actions.

Knowledge Contributions

i. More than Meets the Ears

Scholars of popular culture have suggested that forms of popular media are – at times – relegated to the sidelines or margins of intellectual and political analysis because they can be dismissed as *mere entertainment*. As I discovered, however, this line of thinking extends far beyond the pages of paywalled academic journals and the ivory towers of universities.

During my fieldwork I was interested in exploring the connections between (Lebanese) Arab pop music and Lebanon’s domestic/regional politics. As such, I proceeded to ask high ranking Lebanese political officials what their views on these connections were. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their responses were – at best – dismissive. Minister Ogasapian believed that ‘no one looks Haifa Wehbe for her voice’; Minister Khoury believed that whatever these stars post on the social media accounts was ‘none of our interest’; And Minister Jarrah laughed off Myriam Klink’s Presidential vote as ‘joke.’ The assumption that likely informed each of their responses was that the airbrushed, bedazzled social space occupied by pop stars was completely removed from the violent – even bloody – political space where they worked.

To this end, my fieldwork offers more evidence for the claims made by earlier scholars regarding how popular culture's connections to other socio-political structures is often dismissed or not taken seriously. However, as I have sought to argue here, dismissing forms of popular culture as mere entertainment not only fails to grasp the extent to which it intersects with politics, but also fails to consider the incredible (socio-political) power in the hands of celebrities. With a single *tweet*, a celebrity can reach millions of followers. Their followings can rival or exceed the following of some of the world's most prominent political figures.¹⁷¹ Should a celebrity choose to deploy that power in support of a nationwide protest, for example, their involvement could have a very real impact. While the extent or degree of this impact is, of course, difficult to measure concretely or quantify, pop music celebrities (and other figures boasting massive social media followings) are still in possession of that power. It is a power that can transform them from mere entertainers to political figures worthy of academic and intellectual attention – especially from political scientists, the scholars committed to better understanding the world's myriad of complicated political phenomena.

ii. *(Political) Science Versus the Self*

While it is true that many within the discipline of political science are interested in qualitative approaches, routinely asking questions about the place of author/researcher subjectivity and its place within pedagogy and political research (for a good example of this sort of work, see Sucharov 2018), the mainstream of our discipline remains committed to a positivist agenda bent on making the study of politics more 'scientific.' Commitment to this agenda, moreover, also goes hand-in-hand with the practice of researcher detachment and invisibility.

¹⁷¹ Former Democratic American Presidential Nominee Hillary Clinton, for example, boasts 30.9 million followers on her official *Twitter* page, while Arab pop megastar Nancy Ajram has 30.3 million on her official *Instagram* page.

And this is how my peers and I were socialized through our various methods courses where KKV (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994) was almost always required reading.

But political scientists – like anthropologists, sociologists, and even psychologists – are human beings who exist and participate in the social worlds they study. Indeed, it is this participation that very often inspires us to choose our subject matter. We want to study facets of who and what we are. To this end, my PhD thesis (whatever it may have become or whatever tiny contribution it may offer) is no exception. Had my cultural identity and ethnic heritage been different, I likely would not have chosen my topic.

I realized, however, that Lena Saleh was more deeply embedded within the project. Speaking Arabic, *looking* Arab, and understanding unique cultural customs and ‘quirks’ that allow one to avoid causing offense were all, of course, useful traits/skills. But this list does not fully capture my positionality within the research context. My experiences were also coloured by my heritage. I am my parents’ child; I am a Sunni Muslim; and I am a young female. Different dimensions of who I am as a person came to impact my experiences in different ways. Participants, for example, told me things that they may not have said in front of someone with a different sectarian/religious background. I was granted access to elite level politicians because of my father’s and uncle’s reputation and connections. And conversations with many of my female participants often felt like informal conversations with my mother, aunts, or school friends. Omitting these details and failing to mindfully reflect on their impact(s), I feel, would have been dishonest. Methodologically, reflexivity offered me the tools to directly address this feeling by examining different categories of my identity and their impact on my work.

While the primary result of this decision has been the production of an unusual political science dissertation, a secondary result has been that my dissertation seeks to participate in

methodological conversations within our field about the place and benefits of subjectivity within academic research. To this end, my work (in its own small way) promotes the expansion of the resources hanging on ‘methodological toolbelt’ worn by political scientists as they explore and study the socio-political world.

iii. Changing How We Think

Post-colonial feminist thinkers have long articulated comprehensive and nuanced critiques against problematic constructions of the ‘Third World woman’ and her plight, often symbolized by her culture’s unrelenting commitment to patriarchy. They have explained, moreover, that this reductionist image works to disempower and objectify women in the Global South, reducing them all to a single, monolithic group (Mohanty 1984). In the Middle Eastern context, this image has taken the form of the veiled Muslim woman, shrouded in black and secluded by her male relatives at the behest of Islam’s supposed backwardness.

Despite the numerous indictments of this image by feminist scholars of the Middle East and Islam (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2005; Mernissi 1987), the image has proven to be a lasting one in the collective Western imagination. As Razack (2004, 130) notes: “The body of the Muslim woman, a body fixed in the Western imaginary as confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture, serves to reinforce the threat that the Muslim man is said to pose to the West and is used to justify the extraordinary measures of violence and surveillance required to discipline him and Muslim communities.” The most recent attempt to ‘discipline’ Muslim communities has been, perhaps, the ‘War on Terror’ and the subsequent military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and a number of other Muslim-majority countries. The plight of the Muslim woman, in other words, served as the humanitarian fuel necessary to power the ‘War on Terror.’

My dissertation, as an examination of gender politics in the Arab (Muslim) world, exists within the context of these much larger and still ongoing political and academic debates. Understanding this, I have sought to add my voice and intellectual contributions (however small they may be) to the large and growing body of scholarship that dares to theorize about Arab and Muslim women not as “passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority” (Mahmood 2005, 6), but as active agents and participants within their societies. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 7) notes: “The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on [Arab/Muslim] women’s agency cannot be emphasized enough.”

The Future and Final Words

Reflecting back on the years and months spent preparing for and writing this thesis and the physical, emotional, and intellectual challenges it has posed, I am – honestly – left feeling somewhat unfulfilled. I fully appreciate that my ability to reach this stage is the direct result of my access to extraordinary resources and supports – from family, advisors, committees, and friends – and these are not privileges I take for granted. Rather, my feelings stem largely from current events.

The year 2019 will stand alongside 1943, 1975, and 1990 in Lebanese history. Lebanese people stood united against the political corruption and consociational system that drove their state towards moral and fiscal bankruptcy. The early days and weeks of the protest were full of hope, leading many to believe that things would finally change for the better in Lebanon. However, as I write now – more than a year after the uprising’s start – much of that initial hope has all but disappeared. The country’s economy (already crippled by debt, inflation, and unemployment) is now in total free-fall from the state-mandated COVID-19 lockdowns, with

many businesses forced to close and inflation driving up the costs of basic foodstuffs nearly threefold.

This devastation was compounded on August 4th, 2020 when the Lebanese were forced to watch as nearly half of their historic seaside capital city was destroyed in one human history's largest non-nuclear explosions. The emotional pain experienced by Lebanese at home and abroad was, truly, immeasurable. Following the outcry, Prime Minister's Diab's government resigned. It has been nearly one year since Diab's resignation and Lebanon is still without a government. The return of Saad Hariri to the very same office he vacated in October of 2019, too, appears to suggest that the 'old guard' will not release their grip from around the neck of the suffocating Lebanese state.

As noted above, I am severely limited by time constraints and the desperate need to complete my academic program. I have been unable, therefore, to grant the current crises the academic attention they so rightly deserve. Will the Lebanese political elite stop their childish politicking and form a government? Could the ongoing crisis devolve into another devastating Civil War? What role will social media technologies play in these events? Where will Lebanese pop celebrities be in all of this? While my personal circumstances have left me with a sense of incompleteness because I can no longer delay the completion of my research project to watch events in Lebanon unfold, I am confident that future sociological, economic, and political research on Lebanon will offer any insights into the country's hardships and future.

Until then, one thing is certain: Lebanon has been inhabited by human populations since time immemorial. And while the country and its people experience present hardships, their long history is a testament to their inspiring fortitude.

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