

Women facing religious fundamentalism, the far right and authoritarian states.

– Lebanon

General Overview

The situation in Lebanon for women is largely linked to a state built on religious sectarian lines. Whereby freedom to practice one's religion is translated to the freedom of religious men to impose their interpretations without state regulation, in a way that oppresses both sexes, but women more so than men, and the sexuality of women more so than of men, not to mention non heteronormative relations. Increasingly the state is becoming more authoritarian and right wing, with the recent raids of refugee camps, and brutality against protestors, and parliament continues to illegally extend their mandate, depriving the Lebanese people of the right to vote.

Personal status laws do not exist outside your religious sect. Lebanon has 15 separate personal status laws for its recognized religions but no civil code covering issues such as divorce, property rights, or care of children. And these laws are administered by autonomous religious institutions without government regulation or oversight. Even though by law you can opt out of your sect, there are no civil codes in which you can be covered under. This process is also costly and time consuming. This leaves women in violent relationships, and makes it easier for men to get a divorce and harder for women. Further women's unpaid labor and financial contribution to the marriage is not recognized during divorce. Regarding child custody, female character is scrutinized based on stereotypes and patriarchal values, and even if women get custody, the father is still the legal guardian and in cases where he is no longer alive, it is his family that are the legal guardians. Recently there has been collective action calling for reform of the shia courts specifically, and most actions are reformist and within this structure. The costs are high to access these courts.

Women frequently gave up their financial rights to get out of bad marriages

This structure sees us as parts of families and not individuals. The bourgeois government benefits from these structures as it keeps the working class divided and coopts their struggle in terms of religious freedom. This leaves many laws in stalemate given all sects and ruling parties must agree. Whereby in trying to change the legal age of marriage to 18+ (this is another law that is governed by sects, with each sect having a different age). The leader of Hizbullah comes out and says only god knows when a girl is ready for marriage, and on the other side of the spectrum Geagea, leader of the Lebanese forces in an attempt at being progressive compares girls and women to flowers that must not be plucked until they have bloomed. Identities are linked to sects, and equality is along sect lines.

Regarding the LGBT movement, in the hipster parts of Beirut, we recently had a very commercialised gay pride week. While on the other hand religious fundamentalists on all side, can come to together to agree against non conforming relationships, priving further legitimacy in a climate where religious harmony equals to harmony within the country. In the southern suburbs of Beirut there are crack downs on the LGBT movement. And the language of anti imperialism is used to justify this right wing position whereby the reductionist analysis that anything any US is anti-imperialist is used and despite the fact that the LGBT movement in the US is by no means over.

Domestic work is severely undervalued, where many foreign domestic workers come to Lebanon, are not covered under labour laws, and are treated as slaves, living with their employers, no proper work hours, many not given their day off on Sunday, many isolated and

prevented from organizing. Currently with the anti racism movement combined with the alliance of domestic workers these issues are being tackled. However the union while a part of the unions in Lebanon, is still not recognized by the state and the level of discourse by those in charge is lacking. Trade unions in Lebanon are also heavily bureaucratized and within this a sectarian system.

Due to religious fundamentalism that has created a space for women within the system, this makes the conditions to organize in solidarity much more difficult. These conditions which exploit their unpaid reproductive labour. In the absence of state services, women look after the children, sick and elderly, or domestic workers do. They are placed in competition with one another in that any work that can not be complete by the domestic worker falls on the wife, or daughter or sister. Thereby leading to greater exploitation.

The volunteer roles of women in these religious organisations is another form of unpaid labor.

The conditions create additional burdens on women and through the discourse it is harder to challenge for those in the system that creates dependency

The main issue is the religious fundamentalists have power within the government and autonomous institutions. They create a space for women to exploit their support and labour. And because due to the material conditions most people are conservative in cases where there is injustice they individually aim to navigate the system or organize along their religious lines.

Marital rape is another issue whereby even though the law is finally in the process of being changes. Due to this notion of honour that is furthered by religious men, families would still see this crime as that of a crime against honour and not the autonomy of another persons body. There is a high level of femicide, according to organisations that work on VAW, in terms of level it is the same across religious sects and social classes, areas.

Much of this work is being done by NGOs, which can be problematic however they have a platform not afforded to many. Currently a lot of funding coming in is on gender, and LGBT. When it comes to NGOs it also discredits a lot of the work that was already being done, and bags them all up as western. Not to mention the exploitation of NGO workers' labour to achieve high target numbers.

This prevents solidarity between Lebanese women, refugee women, and foreign domestic workers.

Within the general civil society there are now a number of different movements. We all work in solidarity together without an attempt at universality. With the mobilization that occurred on IWD, we have found this approach thus far to be headed in a better direction. But for most women who are conservative, the more radical manifestations prevent many from joining.