

Sexuality and Socialism in the Contemporary Uprisings – A focus on Lebanon

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Sexuality and the Contemporary Arab Uprisings

The Arab revolutions have brought the questions of sexuality and gender to the forefront. The bodies of protesters across the region, from Egypt to Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, became the sites of struggle between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements. State-sanctioned and counter-revolutionary offensives targeted, in particular, bodies that don't conform to a patriarchal construction, from women to people with non-conforming genders and sexualities (queers, lesbians, gays, trans persons, and those that fall out of these established identity categories). Egypt is a case in point, where under the rule and 'protest law' of Sisi, there has been a noticeable increase of policing, harassment, entrapment and persecution, especially of gay men and trans women, reminiscent of Mubarak's crackdown in the early 2000s, with much more ferocity, and much more ferocious than those of Morsi and the Islamists.²

In Syria, women were at the head of the revolutionary process in early 2011, often participating in protests or establishing safe houses for dissidents, as well as gathering information and moving supplies, pamphlets and medical kits between revolutionaries. Pointedly, female sex workers were among the first to be imprisoned by Assad's crackdown.³ Sexual violence was one of the most notorious forms of violence used against female detainees. These tactics were not exclusive to the Assad regime, and were also used by the Islamist opposition, which enforced strict teachings and arrived to the what we see today of women enslavement and murder of homosexuals and gender non-conforming people. Lebanon has not witnessed these transformations to that same intensity.

Meanwhile, LGBT organizations are few in the region, scattered across Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. Lebanon has seen its LGBT organizing (started in the early 2000s) shift towards legal reformism and a mushrooming of non-governmental service-providing organizations that target LGBT people. During the revolutionary uprisings, LGBT organizations and activists have been split. While some joined the working class in its revolutionary struggle against dictatorship, despotism and corruption (particularly in Egypt), many LGBT organizations, especially those in Lebanon, were averse to politics and have tried to avoid holding any political position. They have, in some instances, opposed the revolutionary process, especially in Syria, as one that is 'Islamist' in nature and anti-gay.

¹ This report is a compilation of several works conducted by socialists in Lebanon, mostly published in Arabic. As it aims to give different perspectives, each section is a summary or a selection of specific paragraphs from each report.

² Scott Long, "Brutal gender crackdown in Egypt: The tomorrows that never came", Paper Bird, May 18 2015.

³ Razan Ghazzawi, "Threads of sexual liberation movements in Arab societies," Presentation on a panel organized by the Coalition of Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies in the World Social Forum, Tunisia, 2012.

Historicizing the position of the 'Left' in Lebanon towards sexuality

Socialism, to a large extent, has developed an approach that goes beyond economic justice to include human liberation, where sexual liberation was a recurrent theme.⁴ Importantly, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 involved an element of sexual liberation, where the revolution wiped away what was seen as Tsarist laws that govern sexuality, including those that criminalized sexual relations between men. At the forefront of this transitional period was Kollontai's work, for example, as Commissar of Social Welfare in revolutionizing common living spaces and communal kitchens and creches all in order to provide the structural conditions for women's liberation from the confines of marriage and the family and the double burden of motherhood and labor.⁵ Having said that, the Bolshevik tradition, in general, was incapable of generating a clear position on issues of sex and women, and the above mentioned achievements were made possible only through painstaking and bitter struggles within the party.

However, this transformation was short-lived. During the transition to Stalinism⁶, radical changes in the social relations between the sexes were eliminated. Women were given medals for having numerous children and homosexual behavior was again made illegal. The Party also re-adopted the pro-family approach to social organizing of reproduction. This tradition within the Soviet Union, the reinforcement of patriarchy and the nuclear family as the main unit of production and social reproduction, became another compromise with capitalist modes of production itself.

This has had a great influence on the traditional left, globally, throughout the cold war period and till this day. At the current time, and for many other reasons besides, the left in Lebanon has always connected women's struggle, like class struggle, to the question of national liberation and state-building, sidelining entirely any debate on the body, the family, and sexuality. This was seen as undermining the question of national liberation, alliance with the national bourgeoisie and the 'conservatism' of the working class. Rather, the left adopted a similar rhetoric to nationalism, and sometimes, far-right parties, emphasizing masculinity and militarization, and glorifying motherhood and the nuclear family construct, clearly departing from any kind of materialist analysis for human social, economic and, necessarily, sexual liberation from oppression.⁷

Traditional leftist and nationalist political parties in Lebanon are, by no means, exempt from investing in this discourse through the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the liberation of the South from Israeli invasion. The questions of homosexuality, sexual liberation and women's

⁴ Sandra Bloodworth, "Marx and Engels on women's and sexual oppression and their legacy." *Marxist Left Review*, Issue 1, Spring 2010.

⁵ Porter, Cathy. *Alexandra Kollontai: a biography*. London: Virago, 1980.

⁶ As Gilbert Ashkar states: "Stalinism, in our understanding, is not a position against the person of Stalin, but is the bureaucratic system that emerged in the Soviet Union and the Third International since the mid 1920s, and remains essentially hegemonic despite the changes made to it."

⁷ Dina Makram Ebeid. (2015). "Talking back: Masculinity and the right time for politics." *Mada Masr*.

liberation has always been absent from their rhetoric and programs, and it appears that these parties have a history of oppressing these thoughts and directions in their own parties and in society. Despite these political movements' connection to the overall revolutionary processes in the region, the secular movement and the traditional left (not to mention the nationalist and sectarian parties) have consistently been ill-prepared to deal with the question of gender, or even the presence of women as active agents of change in the movement. Hiba Abbani describes her experience in the 2011 Downfall of the Sectarian Regime campaign:

“It is not enough to break the silence on sexist practices present in society, what is more difficult is breaking this silence within the circles that themselves claim to struggle against sexism, for, as they claim, this matter is somehow, obviously self-evident...

“In the everyday, man is the ‘master of the situation,’ with his loud voice and imposing body, who pushes with all his strengths to occupy the frontlines. This stampede is, itself, a mastery. As a woman, you have two choices: either join the stampede until you appear in the picture, and here you might be run over and squashed, or to calmly retreat and get as far away as possible from the situation, and stand watching at the margins...

“Survival of the fittest was the prevailing formula; he who raises his voice the loudest and imposes himself the most, is the one that talks. Any kind of gender equity was decidedly forbidden in the meetings, from moderating the meetings to changing sexist behaviors, which pushed many (male and female) to the fringes of posing an opinion of making a contribution.”⁸

Lebanon, however, is seeing a ‘new left’ that is emerging, one that rejects these practices and, slowly but surely, imposes new tools and approaches to tackling issues of sexuality and gender. While nascent, this has come after more than a decade of sexuality and gender activism in Lebanon, since the early 2000s. In 2010, and after 7 years of Helem’s⁹ public engagement in the anti-war movement against the US invasion of Iraq and the rising visibility of LGBT demands in the reformist movement, *Laique Pride*¹⁰ saw a highly mediatized clash between secular nationalist values and the question of sexual freedom. The visibility of homosexuals among the protesters caused a media sensation and an outspoken refusal of the secular block to openly and transparently include sexuality in its campaign. This later became one of the main points of contention in the 2011 Downfall of the Sectarian Regime movement which vehemently refused feminist, LGBT or queer visibility, or any critique of patriarchy and heteronormativity, preferring, instead, to cling to so-called ‘popular’ economic demands.

⁸ See, for example, Hiba Abbani, “Thoughts on the Left and their position on women”, *Social Forum*, Issue 1, Spring 2012.

⁹ A LGBT organization established in Lebanon officially in 2004.

¹⁰ A secular movement in the country that called for the dismantlement of the sectarian regime in lieu of a secular government.

Sexual rights movements in Lebanon: a 'mixed legacy'

The early 2000s saw the beginnings of Lebanon's sexual rights movement, partly evolving from left-wing organizations such as *Khat Mubashir* and *al-Yassari* (the Leftist) magazine. The beginnings of sexual rights activism in Lebanon on the public scale could be characterized as subversive activism, culminating in Khat Mubashir's Radical Film Club and its "Man is a Woman" film festival in 2001.¹¹ These first developments were in the wake of the Queen Boat "panic" of 2001 in Egypt, which marked the first of many explicit targeting and highly publicized repression of sexual non-conformity in the region over the past generation and inspired a regressive penal code reform in the autumn of 2002 in Lebanon, which intended to increase the scope of the anti-sodomy law (Article 534). Both the Egyptian and Lebanese repressive campaigns invoked a new public enemy of the state – the homosexual. In 2002, members of newly-formed human rights initiative *Hurriyat Khassa* (Private Freedoms) (2001-2007) formed the ad hoc group, Helem, which became an organization in 2004. This very same trajectory participated in the politicization of some feminist organizations in Lebanon, and the first formations of radical feminist organizing later in 2009,¹² which refused both the "elitism of many Lebanese feminist organization" and to allow "the NGO funding structure" a principal role in defining work by left-leaning activists.¹³

However, it is possible to trace the shift in strategy in LGBT organizing in Lebanon, where the subversive activism of the past (as was the case with Khat Mubashir's *Man is Woman* campaign in 2001 and the *Ana Shaz* Campaign in 2010) have been largely discarded and replaced by demobilized reformism and NGOization, following several years of quiet elimination of public spaces for gay cruising and non-conformity, in general, in favor of rampant gentrification.¹⁴

Throughout the 2000s, the sexuality movement underwent chronic paralysis due to a political divide. Faithful to a universalizing LGBT discourse, where the basis for Helem's mobilization was on sexual identity and not politics, Helem underwent chronic political paralysis due to a political divide that progressively polarized the organization. This struggle between mobilization and demobilization led to a crisis in 2006, during the Israeli war on Lebanon, which revolved around political participation and mobilization. The rift in the LGBT movement in 2006 manifested around a leftist membership that called for political engagement with the national struggle and the opening of the organization's doors to refugees, on one end, and the more identitarian

¹¹ Ghassan Makarem, "The story of Helem", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2011, pp. 98-112.

¹² Bernadette Daou, "Feminisms in Lebanon: after proving loyalty to the "Nation", will the "Body" rise within the "Arab Spring"?", *Civil Society Knowledge Center*, Lebanon Support.

¹³ Nadine Naber and Zeina Zaatari, "Reframing the war on terror: Feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activism in the context of the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon", *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2014, pp. 91-111.

¹⁴ Campaigns against cruising spaces and meeting points such as cinemas or bathhouses have persisted ever since the publicity surrounding Queen Boat; the latest example being the raid on Agha Hammam in Beirut on August 13, 2014 and related state discourse on protecting masculinity. This could be contrasted to the publicity regarding a more globalized gay nightlife in Beirut in "gay" themed reporting abroad; see, for example, Briand Bedford, "Beirut and Lebanon: The gay paradise of the Arab world", *Gay Star News*, 8 June 2012.

membership that called for an exclusive focus on gay rights as the ceiling for engagement. The severity of the war ultimately required a forced opening of Helem's doors to the displaced refugees and political contact of Helem with national parties and the anti-imperialism and anti-zionist movement, including Hezbollah. This led to the estrangement of a number of members from the organization, and the recruitment of many others.

In 2005, Helem's prioritizing of gay male issues over queer/Lesbian women's led to a split of queer and lesbian women from the organization. This coincided with engagement with the relief efforts following the 2006 Israeli invasion saw, notably, the presence of the Feminist Collective. "Identity politics" was largely implicated in the crisis, where the LGBT framework, seen to be imposed by international frameworks of LGBT organizing, in its dismissiveness of male privilege and its equalization of men and women's struggles, organically favored gay-male centered organizing and alienated women.

By 2010, the political divides had only widened. On the question of imperialism, while one pole of the membership called for closer ties with the US-based international gay movement, and through collaboration with the International Gay and Lesbian Tourism Association (IGLTA), the other opposed these efforts. The revolutionary left in Helem, during that time, also participated in the Downfall of the Regime Campaign, which was opposed by many. These political divides fueled a rift in 2011 that revolved around issues of neglect around sexual harassment and strategies of demobilization and service-provision and a shift towards reformism. Ultimately, this rift led to the withdrawal of the revolutionary left from the organization in 2012.

Since then, gay activism has further moved towards a demobilized and NGOized trajectory, estrangement from political engagement, and a crystallization of its affiliation with international US-based agencies. Sexual rights organizations have since formed that have withdrawn their investment in mobilization (through closing the community center), removed themselves from political participation, and instituted top-down staff-based approaches that increasingly revolve around donor agendas and the delivery of services (such as health, legal, social, etc.) and may prioritize a politics of respectability, value mass professionalization of the leadership and membership, and ultimately create activist spaces that are exclusively middle-class arenas.

It is important to note, here, that such services provided by NGOs are vital in a State that provides no public healthcare coverage, no protection from labor violations, and increased inflation and standards of living, as well as fierce policing and detention of LGBT and queer persons. This policing follows clear class lines.¹⁵ Similarly, transgender persons experience a more intense system of regulation and both social and state policing specifically for their defiance of performing their biologically determined gender and/or sexuality.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lara Damaghi, Alena Mack and Doris Jaalouk, "A case study of the first legal, above-ground LGBT organization in the MENA region", Helem, 2009.

¹⁶ Ahmad J. Saleh and Adriana A. Qubaia, "Transwomen's Navigation of Arrest and Detention In Beirut: A Case Study", Lebanon Support, *Civil Society Knowledge Center*, Gender Equity and Information Network, January 15, 2015.

Masculinity, militarism and homophobia

LGBT organizing in Lebanon has yet to formulate a response to an emerging militarized nationalism.¹⁷ As the region, the country, and the city, become increasingly militarized, a growing concern of protecting masculinity from deviance can be seen. In addition to the material roots of sexual oppression, as connected to the family as a basic unit of capitalist production, we find that the increase in war, conflict and militarization in the region is propagating a kind of homophobia that is strongly connected to preserving Arab masculinity and the family.

¹⁷ For example, in December 2013, a local mayor ordered a highly mediatized arrest and humiliation of transgender individuals in his municipality. The mayor's campaign condemned "moral perversions" as a threat, characterizing his municipality as a "Fortress of Resilience". This condemnation was linked to the preservation of militarized masculinity and sectarian pride. Previously, the repression of sexual rights through security arms did not require justification.