

# Civil Society *Issue 5 - November, 2021* Review *— Social Science for Change —*

**CHALLENGING POWER: GENDER AND SOCIAL  
JUSTICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*Edited by Gabriella Nassif*

Paying “Lip Service” to Gender Equality: The Hollow Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming in Jordan / From “Liberal” to “Liberating” Empowerment: The Community Protection Approach as Best Practice to Address NGO-ization / Achieving Long Term Goals on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Protection in Lebanon / Resistance, Gender, and Identity Politics: A Conversation with Rasha Younes / On Fatal Chaos and Disruption, and Women in Public Space: Cairo’s Street Situation and the Murder of the “Maadi Girl” and the Single “Al Salam Doctor” / Bodies, Space, and Remembrance

# Civil Society *Issue 5, November 2021* Review

— *Social Science for Change* —

**CHALLENGING POWER: GENDER AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

*Edited by Gabriella Nassif*

Published by the Centre for Social Sciences  
Research & Action, Beirut  
November 2021.  
ISSN: 2617-6025

Edited by:  
Gabriella Nassif

Editorial Board:  
Dr. Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi: co-editor  
Dr. Maïssam Nimer: co-editor  
Dr. Sbeih Sbeih: co-editor  
Léa Yammine: communication editor

Programmes Officer: Mia BouKhaled  
Copy-editing: Muriel Kahwaji

Art Direction: Léa Yammine  
Graphic Design and layout: Amy Chiniara

Centre for Social Sciences Research & Action ©  
Beirut, November 2021.

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Social Sciences Research & Action or its partners.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations and referencing in critical reviews and articles, and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

### ***About the centre***

The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action is a multidisciplinary space creating synergies and bridging between the scientific, practitioner, and policy spheres. The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action aims to foster social change through innovative uses of social science, digital technologies, and publication and exchange of knowledge.

We achieve our mission through transformative research and engagement, around the pillars of fellowships, the peer-reviewed journal *Civil Society Review*, engagement in multi-level fora, the Civil Society Incubator, and Daleel Madani the civil society network.

### ***About the Review***

Published by The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action, the *Civil Society Review* emphasises cutting-edge and critical transdisciplinary analysis in a wide range of topics relevant to social sciences. It offers a novel space where academics and practitioners converge to discuss theories and reflect on practices.

It demonstrates a variety of perspectives through dynamic, historicised, and processual

approaches to reflections on civil society action, and strategies in the region. While we acknowledge the polysemy and controversy behind the concept of "civil society", and the often elusive opposition it displays, we are committed to producing original literature that both offers a reflection on civil society, particularly its contentious role and autonomy, as well as creates knowledge for what we hope can constitute tools for action and social change in the region. In this vein, the *Civil Society Review*, grounded in empirical research, aims at contributing to a theoretical production adopting a comparative approach among countries in the region and elsewhere. It hence focuses on the creation of a knowledge space for epistemological debates, theoretical usages, as well as empirical methodologies.

The *Civil Society Review* produces evidence-based research and analysis, and disseminates findings and recommendations to promote civic engagement, shape policies, and stimulate debate within civil society spheres.

In addition to its editorial board, the *Civil Society Review* draws expertise from practitioners, experts, researchers, and policy makers.

For more information visit: <https://socialsciences-centre.org/csr>

# *Table of Contents*

## ***Introduction***

P.06 GABRIELLA NASSIF

P. 11 *Meet the editor*

P. 12 *Meet the authors*

## ***“Gender Empowerment,” “Women’s Rights,” and Other Buzzwords: Assessing International Development and Gender Programming in the Middle East***

- Paying “Lip Service” to Gender Equality: The Hollow Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming in Jordan
- P. 18 ROSALIND RAGETLIE, DINA NAJJAR, BIPASHA BARUAH
- From “Liberal” to “Liberating” Empowerment: The Community Protection Approach as Best Practice to Address NGO-ization
- P. 46 NICOLAS GIANNI, FRANCESCO MICHELE, CHIARA LOZZA
- Achieving Long Term Goals on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Protection in Lebanon
- P. 72 MENAAL MUNSHEY

## ***Gender in Practice: Strategies and Histories for the Future***

- Resistance, Gender, and Identity Politics: A Conversation with Rasha Younes
- P. 106 GABRIELLA NASSIF

## ***Body Politics and the Realities of Gender Today***

- On Fatal Chaos and Disruption, and Women in Public Space: Cairo’s Street Situation and the Murder of the “Maadi Girl” and the Single “Al Salam Doctor”
- P. 114 NEHAL ELMELIGY
- Bodies, Space, and Remembrance
- P. 126 NUR TURKMANI

# Introduction

GABRIELLA NASSIF

## CHALLENGING POWER: GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

The present issue is the culmination of more than two years of work. During this time, our editorial team and our writers living in Lebanon faced countless disruptions to our normal working environments, beginning with the October 2019 Thawra; the COVID-19 pandemic and the government-enforced lockdowns beginning in early 2020; and the crippling economic and political crisis that has left Lebanon a shell of its former self. Add to this the devastating loss of human life and destruction in the aftermath of the 4 August 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut, which nearly brought the entire country to a standstill. Similarly, the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region experienced economic downturns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, while countries like Palestine, Yemen, and Syria all continued to deal with geopolitical instability, and in the case of Palestine, occupation, as well.

A few months before the Thawra, this issue began as a set of reflections and questions about current feminist work in

the SWANA region, and what this looked like in the face of increasing international involvement in civil society activities and organizations. Our reflections coalesced around three thematic focuses. The first thematic area, “Negotiating with the State,” asked authors to reflect on what Deniz Kandiyoti (1998) called “patriarchal bargains,” or the strategies used by women’s rights organizations and feminist activists “within a set of concrete constraints” (274).<sup>1</sup> How are such “patriarchal bargains” made today? Has such bargaining resulted in any substantive changes to the status of gender equality? Our second thematic area, “The NGO-ization of Women’s Movements,” focuses on the historical legacy of NGO-ization, and the ways in which NGO-ization continues to impact women’s rights and gender equality organizations and movements in the region.<sup>2</sup> We asked authors to reflect on the ways in which the increasing influence of international donors and agencies in the field of development has both helped and hindered gender equality in the SWANA region. What does the impact of the growing presence of international funding mean for feminists across the region?

---

1 Kandiyoti, Deniz. (1988). “Bargaining with Patriarchy.” *Gender and Society*, 2(3), 274-290.

2 See Jad, Islah. (2007). “The NGO-ization of Arab women’s movements.” In *Feminisms in development: Contradictions, contestations and challenges*, edited by Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead, 177–190. London: Zed Books. DOI 10.5040/9781350220089.ch-014.

Finally, our third thematic area focused on the relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality in relation to the growing influence of international donors and the NGO-ization of women's rights and gender equality across the SWANA region. Most importantly, we asked authors to consider what, if any, radical alternatives are available to feminists in an environment that continues to uphold the heteronormative sex/gender binary? Relatedly, what is happening to those activists and organizations that actively challenge this binary?

Despite the difficulties we faced while compiling this issue, we were able to bring together a handful of authors whose work insightfully highlights many of the current trends within feminist mobilizing in the SWANA region. The articles, interviews, and personal reflections included in this issue collectively read as an assessment of the current moment of crisis in the region through the lens of gender, contributing new ways of thinking about, and reacting to the current compounded crises plaguing the SWANA region. A further strength of this issue is the diversity with which authors use the terms "gender" and "feminist," drawing attention to the ways that such terms are not "neutral;" rather, they are historically specific and signal established power dynamics, especially in the field of international development and humanitarian aid. Further, a handful

of the pieces in this issue challenge gender as a standalone "identity," and articulate a truly intersectional approach to the ways that gender must be used as a lens through which we can begin to understand and explain the power dynamics structuring our everyday lives.

Relatedly, the difficulties we faced while compiling this issue are illustrative for those engaged in feminist struggles and analysis. Under the current conditions (and arguably, those that preceded this current "moment" of crisis), it has become a daily struggle to ensure that our needs as workers are met. Simultaneously, the continuously increasing demands for worker productivity have made it much more difficult, and in some cases nearly impossible, for many communities to sustain their life-making processes. This is particularly true for communities that are marginalized along the lines of race, gender and sexuality, and disability, to name only a few. Framed as such, questions about the time, labor, and creativity needed to produce feminist knowledge come to the fore. Is feminist writing really possible in the current moment? If so, who is it possible for? In other words, under what conditions can such a process of creative and analytical writing take place? And how can we create space for the most marginalized writers, whose communities are under some of the most extreme pressures just to survive?

As a final note, it is important to highlight that feminist writing is an act of labor. It is grounded in material realities, it draws from our communities and personal networks, and it is embedded within the everyday political economy of survival. It is an embodied practice, one that puts front and center the challenges of existing under the current mode of capitalist production. Feminist writing is an intimate, collective activity that aims to reflect on the ways that survival is not only coded by gender, but by other axes of difference including race, class, ability, and sexuality among others. In practice, analyzing and writing about the very structures that perpetuate the ongoing violence against marginalized communities can be self-defeating. For many, the act of feminist writing and reflection means embarking on some of the most draining and intense work, only to find rejection and, in the worst cases, patronizing dismissals of feminist work as somehow “less than” work produced from a more “objective” lens, terms used to set exclusionary boundaries around knowledge production. This issue serves as a reminder of the intense nature of feminist knowledge production, and the importance of such work during times of crisis.

This issue begins with a look at the region’s long and complicated relationship with the industry of international development, with

a particular focus at internationally-funded “gender empowerment” and “women’s rights” programming. The three research papers in this section foreground the ways that “single-issue” women’s rights programming, top-down and short-term international donor funding, and the effects of government surveillance on women’s rights organizations have resulted in the depoliticization of women’s and gender rights. To various degrees, each of the articles extends the conceptual framework of “NGO-ization,” or the continued professionalization of grassroots movements into bureaucratic organizations, to challenge the ways that international donor involvement in women’s rights work on the ground continues to flatten the layered and complex demands of women and girls, refugees, non-citizens, and non-normative genders and sexualities, queer communities, and LGBTQ identities in a way that reinforces the very same power dynamics that women’s rights programming, at its core, intends to change.

The interview included in this issue highlights the complexities of gender through careful attention to collective resistance and uprising. It discusses the video documentary “If Not Now, When?” with the director Rasha Younes. The documentary draws attention to the ways that queer communities participated in the

October 2019 Thawra. In doing so, Younes moves beyond the lens of identity politics to show that “these identities, LGBTQ identities, are not separated from all [of] these other systems of oppression that exist.” Rather, Younes’ documentary challenges the ways that current international human rights discourse un/intentionally perpetuates non-normative identities, including but not limited to LGBTQ identities, as somehow detached from the political economy of the everyday. By paying attention to these everyday realities, Younes argues, we can begin to ensure the “actualization of social justice” on the ground, without losing sight of the underlying structural logics or political economy that helps to maintain the current system.

This issue concludes with two powerful personal reflections. Both Turkmani and Elmeligy’s pieces are concerned with the issue of public space in light of various gendered contestations to the historical construction of these spaces as, predominantly, cis-gendered male. Extending Ghassan Moussawi’s (2020) analytical concept *الوضع* /al-wad’ (the situation), Elmeligy articulates *وضع الشارع* /wad’ el share’ to mean “the situation in the street/the street situation” as a framework through which to understand the often violent, chaotic, and unwelcoming environment of the street for Cairene

women. In two recent moments of violence that resulted in the deaths of two Cairene women—the “Maadi Girl” and the “Al Salam Doctor”—Elmeligy highlights the ways that wad’ el share’ overcomes spatial barriers through its very flexibility: wad’ el share’ is not dependent on a particular environment; rather, it “goes into effect when a woman “talks back” to it.” As “talking back” spills across various ideological and material boundaries, so too does wad’ el share’ extend its violent logic.

Nur Turkmani’s piece reflects on the ways that Lebanese streets became a place of intimate encounters during the October 2019 Thawra. Turkmani traces the various threats to the body, from the threats of police violence during the Thawra to the immunological threats of COVID-19 as people continued to reclaim public spaces during the early months of 2020, and how women’s bodies were often at the center of these spaces. The sudden, and at times overbearing focus on the physicality of the body, across both the revolution and COVID-19, reinforced a corporeal sense of community, one that gets lost in the “bubble” of everyday living in Lebanon. The changes that the revolution and COVID-19 provoked in relation to the body were only exacerbated in the aftermath of the explosion at the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020. Once again, bodies flooded the streets, in protest of

the extreme loss of life and damage. Even while under direct threat, bodies have the potentiality to create and negotiate new spaces. “The presence of our bodies has marked [public spaces] like a memory that refuses to die.”

# *Meet the Editor*

## GABRIELLA NASSIF

Gabriella Nassif is an ABD PhD student at the University at Buffalo, and the managing editor of *Al-Raida*, a bi-annual, feminist journal focused on the Arab region and published by The Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University. Gabriella's research has been supported by the UB Humanities Institute and the American Association of University Women. Her research analyzes social reproduction processes and institutions in the lives of marginalized communities and care workers. Gabriella teaches courses on gender in the Southwest Asia and North Africa region, feminist political economy, and gender and globalization. Gabriella has also worked as a research consultant with IPSOS, UN Women, UNFPA, and the ILO on issues related to gender equality in Lebanon. Gabriella's work has been published in *Antipode*, and other media outlets including *The Conversation*, *Your Middle East*, and *Muftah*.

# *Meet the Authors*

## **BIPASHA BARUAH**

Baruah is the Canada Research Chair in Global Women's Issues and Professor in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Western University. Dr. Baruah conducts interdisciplinary research on economy, environment, and development; gender and work; and social, political, and economic inequality. She has published one monograph and over 100 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, working papers, policy briefs and professional reports. Dr. Baruah serves frequently as an expert reviewer, consultant and advisor to international development and environmental protection organizations. The Royal Society of Canada named Dr. Baruah to The College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists in 2015. "The College" is Canada's only national system of multidisciplinary recognition for the emerging generation of Canadian intellectual leadership. Every year, it names individuals who have made exceptional professional contributions to Canada and the world within 15 years of completing their doctorates.

## **NEHAL ELMELIGY**

Elmeligy is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology minoring in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. She earned her MA in Women's, Gender,

and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Her publication, based on her MA research, entitled *Making a Scene: Young Women's Feminist Social Nonmovement in Cairo* is published in the *Journal of Resistance Studies*. You will also find a future publication of hers in *Gender and Society* in February 2022 entitled *Airing Egypt's Dirty Laundry: BuSSy's Storytelling as Feminist Social Change*. In her dissertation fieldwork in Egypt in 2022, she plans to conduct qualitative research to investigate the developing feminist counterpublic on social media, and its connections to material, everyday life.

## **NICOLAS GIANNI**

Gianni is a Policy and Advocacy Officer at WEWORLD-GVC. He holds an MA in International Relations from Leiden University.

## **CHIARA LOZZA**

Lozza is a freelance consultant on gender-related issues, designing trainings and materials on gender-based violence, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), and alternative masculinities. Previously, she was a Gender Specialist at WEWORLD-GVC, based in Tunisia. Lozza holds an MA in Human Rights and Ethics of International Cooperation from the University of Bergamo, an MSc in Middle East Politics from SOAS University

of London, and a postgraduate diploma in Migration and Refugee Law from the University of Bergamo.

#### FRANCESCO MICHELE

Michele has been coordinating International Advocacy, Policy and Innovation at We World, and most recently he has led the design of the Global Protection Analysis Framework. He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Perugia, and has an MA in International Relations with the University of Perugia and in Humanitarian Action with the University Carlos III, Madrid. Michele has 15 years of senior management experience in humanitarian and development programs in Middle East, North Africa and Latin America.

#### MENAAL MUNSHEY

Munshey is a lawyer and criminologist. She is regional consultant on gender equality at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA). She is also a PhD candidate in criminology at the University of Cambridge where her research focuses on access to justice in cases of intimate partner violence in Lebanon. She holds an MPhil in Criminological Research from the University of Cambridge. She was called to the Bar of England and Wales, and has practised law in Pakistan. Previously,

she has worked as a policy researcher and consultant at United Nations agencies in Tokyo, Barcelona, Vienna and Beirut.

#### DINA NAJJAR

Najjar joined the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in 2014 as a social and gender specialist. A socio-cultural anthropologist by training, she focuses on the link between gender equality and policies; agricultural technologies and delivery systems; rural employment and migration; adaptation to climate change; and productive assets, including access to land and ownership, in the Middle East and North Africa. Her geographical expertise includes Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Sudan. She has also conducted research in Uzbekistan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and India. Dr. Najjar is fluent in Arabic and proficient in French and Swahili. She received her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Western Ontario, Canada.

#### ROSALIND RAGETLIE

Ragetlie is an internationally experienced researcher and holds a Ph.D. in Geography from Western University. Her research interests and areas of expertise include gender and development, feminist policy, food insecurity, smallholder and peasant farming, rural and sustainable livelihoods, women's health, and gender-based violence,

with regional specializations in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

### **NUR TURKMANI**

Turkmani is a Lebanese-Syrian researcher and writer in Beirut. Her research approach is often ethnographic and she focuses on gender, refugee livelihoods, climate and security, and grassroots movements in Lebanon. Her non-fiction and poetry have been published in *The Adroit Journal*, *Syria Untold*, *Jadaliyya*, *London Poetry*, and others. Nur's poem 'Body Parts' was selected as a runner-up for the Barjeel Poetry Prize. She is the Managing Editor of *Ruġted Radishes: Beirut Art and Literary Journal's* website and is currently studying creative writing at the University of Oxford.



***“Gender  
Empowerment,”  
“Women’s  
Rights,” and Other  
Buzzwords: Assessing  
International  
Development and  
Gender Programming  
in the Middle East***

- Paying “Lip Service” to Gender Equality:  
The Hollow Implementation of Gender  
Mainstreaming in Jordan  
P.18 ROSALIND RAGETLIE, DINA NAJJAR,  
BIPASHA BARUAH
- From “Liberal” to “Liberating”  
Empowerment: The Community Protection  
Approach as Best Practice to Address  
NGO-ization  
P.46 NICOLAS GIANNI, FRANCESCO  
MICHELE, CHIARA LOZZA
- Achieving Long Term Goals on Sexual and  
Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Protection  
in Lebanon  
P.72 MENAAL MUNSHEY



***Paying “Lip  
Service” to  
Gender  
Equality:  
The Hollow  
Implementation  
of Gender  
Mainstreaming  
in Jordan***

ROSALIND RAGETLIE, DINA  
NAJJAR, BIPASHA BARUAH

## ABSTRACT

Gender equality became one of the focal points of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Jordan after the establishment of the Jordanian National Commission for Women in 1992. While civil society is typically considered to be a separate entity from the state, the relationship between the state, civil society, and the monarchy in Jordan creates an intertwined space for gender equality programming and advocacy. Based on a sample of 23 international, state-led, royal, and non-royal affiliated CSOs in Jordan, our findings suggest that gender equality is used as rhetoric more than as implementable policy or practice. Few CSOs take a holistic gender-responsive approach, and interventions aimed at reducing gender inequality are often fragmented and ad hoc in nature. We argue that the blurred line between domestic CSOs (with or without the support of international organizations), the monarchy, and the defensive democratization pursued by the state also undermine the potential for CSOs to engage with the social and political roots of gender inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

“Gender mainstreaming” has attracted international attention since the 1990s, surging in popularity after the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, after which the European Commission took on a leading role promoting it as a means to achieve gender equality (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009; Charlesworth 2005). After decades of uneven implementation of gender mainstreaming programs, a significant body of literature has emerged from the European context suggesting that these programs have been largely ineffective in targeting the root causes of gender inequality (Meier and Celis 2011; Daly 2005; Mósesdóttir and Erlingsdóttir 2005; Hafner-Burton et al. 2009; Charlesworth 2005).

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to be identified as one of the most gender-unequal regions in the world in terms of women’s ability to access employment, property ownership, and political participation. Though a few studies assess the extent to which gender mainstreaming has been effective in the MENA region, there lacks a systematic assessment of gender and development programming conducted by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Jordan, where the relationship between the state, civil society, and the monarchy create a uniquely complex and intertwined space for gender equality programming and advocacy. While the term civil society typically refers to a sector of society separate from the state and market, inclusive of, but not limited to, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (United Nations, n.d.), this distinction is not evident in the Jordanian context. In this article, we use the broader umbrella term CSO interchangeably with NGO, since the former is inclusive of the latter. We rely on a diverse sample of 23 interviews with international, state-led, royal, and non-royal affiliated CSOs in Jordan, as well as an extensive review of the literature produced on CSO gender programming in the MENA region.

## "DEMOCRATIZATION" AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN APOLITICAL CIVIL SOCIETY

In Jordan, it was not until 1989 that CSOs began to proliferate after the period of political liberalization initiated during the late King Hussein’s reign, which included parliamentary elections and the drafting of a national charter (Clark and Michuki 2009; Robinson 1998). This was part of Jordan’s 1990s transition into a “façade democracy,” wherein the democratization process was controlled by the King’s political agenda, and thus power remained in the hands of the monarchy (Milton-Edwards 1993, 201). Under this system, the monarchy allows for moderate liberalization that veils a populist authoritarianism, which includes restrictions on women’s organizations, and an avoidance of changes to laws that would elevate women’s political and social status (Jad 2004; Wiktorowicz 2000,

1999). Political change during this time took the form of modest attempts at liberalization that were regime-initiated, and without any sustained pressure from social movements (Wiktorowicz 2000). Robinson (1998, 387) characterizes this process in Jordan as a case of “defensive democratization” under the Hashemite regime. In other words, the state implemented preemptive reforms to distract the population from the economic crisis of the 1980s, while maintaining the dominant political culture. Hence, the process of democratization was led by the ruling elite to placate citizens and quash political unrest. Defensive democratization in Jordan required little reordering of power, or fundamental societal or economic changes. This defensive political reform was simply a reshuffling that aimed to prevent more radical social change (Robinson 1998); it ensured citizens’ economic security and access to social services in exchange for granting the regime autonomy and control (Gubser 2002; Wiktorowicz 2002). Thus, NGOs, development agencies, and other CSOs emerged not as contentious actors, but as a means of exerting state control in exchange for economic resources, social services, and limited political freedoms (Wiktorowicz 1999, 2000). As such, CSOs were rendered apolitical.

The emergence of this depoliticized CSO sector in Jordan has resulted in an absence of space for political opposition. This depoliticization has undermined any potential for collective political action in general, and particularly for the women’s movement. Prior to independence and during state-formation in Arab countries, women’s movements were actively engaged in the struggle for women’s rights, and they were well-connected to emerging international women’s movements (Jad 2004; Al-Ali 2003). However, in the 1960s, the newly emerging state of Jordan strongly opposed independent women’s organizations (Jad 2004). Moreover, the process of defensive democratization was effective in depoliticizing CSOs in general and women’s organizations in particular by creating a culture of fear in relation to political engagement (Ferguson and Apsani 2013).

Donor-driven development agendas further complicate this, making it difficult to “carve out an autonomous space” that allows organizations to pursue their own agendas (Chowdhury 2011, 415). The international donor community has therefore been complicit in exerting power over local CSOs’ agendas: “NGOization leads to the transformation of a cause for social change into a project with a plan, a timetable, and a limited budget, which is “owned” for reporting and used for the purposes of accountability vis-à-vis the funders” (Jad 2007, 627-628). Social movements, including women’s movements (Ferguson and Apsani, 2013), have been replaced with institutionalized, development-focused interventions that are ineffective in fostering systemic change. Similarly, the professionalization of these organizations “produce upward rather than downward accountability, exclusion rather than inclusion; and ‘scaling up’ brings with it bureaucratization” (Friedman 1992, 142 as cited in Jad 2007). The professionalization of CSOs includes, for example, a recruitment process that favors those with subject-specific technical knowledge and academic training over those with experience in activism and engagement (Clark and Michuki 2009).

In Jordan, for example, CSO employees are generally highly educated, English speaking women of a different social class from the constituencies they are meant to represent (Clark and Michuki 2009), which creates dissonance and a disconnect from the low-income and even middle-class women that CSOs are meant to advocate for. In order to exert some form of political and moral influence over governments and societies at large, women's organizations must be able to represent middle class and poor women's needs and interests (Jad 2004), which CSOs in Jordan have largely failed to do. Their efforts are largely based on social welfare and education, and are operationalized through top-down approaches that do little to foster voluntarism, participatory decision-making, or grassroots mobilization, all of which are important for collective action (Jad 2003). For example, Ababneh (2016) examines how daily wage workers in Jordan were inspired by the Arab Spring to organize and mobilize for better wages and working conditions despite the lack of support from the formal professional women's rights CSOs in Jordan. Ababneh uses this example to argue that mass political mobilization around gender issues in Jordan will probably not happen within the constraints of the institutionalized CSO sector. Mass mobilizations are more likely to emerge around issues important to poor and marginalized women within the context of more flexible grassroots movements, as was the case with the daily wage labor movement. These issues are compounded by the various restrictions delimiting civil society organizations in Jordan.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE, THE MONARCHY, AND CSOS IN JORDAN

Officially registered NGOs in Jordan fall into three broad categories: (1) non-governmental organizations that were established independently of the state, but are subject to strict state oversight and control; (2) semi- or quasi-governmental organizations established by the government; and, (3) royal organizations established by royal decree and headed by a member of the royal family (Clark and Michuki 2009). It is important to note that quasi-governmental and state-founded organizations can be categorized as "government organized NGOs" (GONGOs), yet they are not, by definition, "non-governmental" entities (Carapico 2000, 14). Despite varying levels of independence, all NGOs in Jordan are bound by state control, having either been created by or "severely restricted and controlled by the state" (Al-Ali 2003, 222). For example, the second largest NGO in Jordan is one that provides programming in gender and development, but it is a Royal NGO (RONGO) headed by Queen Noor, and includes a board of directors that is appointed by "royal decree" (Wiktorowicz 2002, 86). Even for the seemingly independent CSOs and national chapters of international development organizations, the state exerts a high level of social control through surveillance and administration.

Several legal statutes in Jordan, namely the Law of Public Meetings (60), the Law of Societies and Social Organizations (33), and the Political Party Law (32) have meant that women's NGOs are restricted to apolitical work, which means they can only "provide social services without any intention of [...] political gains" (Wiktorowicz 2000, 51). Law 32 restricts political activities to those within political parties, which renders civil society more broadly apolitical (Wiktorowicz 2000). Under the vague umbrella of "political affairs," Law 60 provides the authorities broad purview to control and police collective participation (Wiktorowicz 2000, 50). The law stipulates that any public gathering regarding politics must have advanced written consent from authorities, and must meet many stringent regulations or face being dispersed by violent means if necessary (Wiktorowicz 1999; 2000). This results in civil engagement that is controlled by the state, and is thus an extension of state power, rather than a countervailing influence upon it. Organizations must adhere strictly to the state-imposed controls or face dissolution or the reorganization of their board and activities as the state deems fit (Wiktorowicz 2002).

Law 33 also defines a rigid operational space for NGOs through the surveillance and control of their operations, ranging from their objectives and conditions for membership to their funding and audit requirements (Wiktorowicz 2000, 2002). This includes the requirement to submit detailed NGO records, including those concerning finances, board meetings, and membership, and gives the government the right to perform inspections of NGOs at any time (Wiktorowicz 2002). Within this system, bureaucracy becomes a substitute for more overt forms of oppression (Wiktorowicz 2000). Moreover, NGOs in Jordan are centralized and overseen by a monitoring arm of the regime, the General Union of Voluntary Societies (GUVS), which polices its member NGOs and requires substantial annual fees that can drain the funds of smaller organizations (Wiktorowicz 2002). The state also draws its power from the fact that it is a source of potential funding for NGOs, which is dispensed at the discretion of the GUVS. These arrangements facilitate self-regulation and self-monitoring of NGOs, which allows the state to save on surveillance costs (Wiktorowicz 2000). The ultimate result of these laws and administrative bureaucracy is that the state has strict control over collective action. In fact, this system has been identified as a form of "domestic colonization," wherein social control is enforced through the administrative arm of the state (Wiktorowicz 2000, 48). State control of CSOs and NGOs, unsurprisingly, limits the political scope of these organizations' work and encourages short-term interventions that are limited to education and poverty alleviation (Wiktorowicz 2002, 1999, 2000; Al-Ali 2003). These laws have also weakened the potential for political mobilization specifically for the women's movement since its demands for social, political, and economic equality tend to be viewed as disruptive of established familial and societal patriarchal structures and hierarchies.

## GENDER MAINSTREAMING: THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

Gender mainstreaming is both a theoretical concept and a model for practice that has gained large-scale traction in a relatively short period of time, perhaps because of its symbolism as a progressive approach to addressing gender inequality (Daly 2005; Walby 2005). Gender mainstreaming seeks to “institutionalize equality by embedding gender-sensitive practices and norms in the structures, processes, and environment of public policy” (Daly 2005, 435). Gender mainstreaming aims to address and challenge “deeply embedded norms and assumptions about gender relations” which shape gender inequality (Daly 2005, 440). In practice however, its implementation varies greatly from one country to another. Additionally, gender mainstreaming often fails to consider gender, and focuses on women instead. This approach is not comparable to engaging with gender as it fails to adequately consider the ways that gender is constructed and embedded within social systems (Harding 1995). Ultimately, by focusing on women’s disadvantages, gender mainstreaming often fails to dismantle structures of inequality (Daly 2005).

A second concern about gender mainstreaming is that it tends to be operationalized in terms of breadth, but not depth (Daly 2005). This “horizontal” implementation does not fulfill the intent of mainstreaming, which is to deeply embed and institutionalize gender equality (Daly 2005, 444). This may explain why mainstreaming often does not exhaustively shift policy makers’ thinking around gender, thereby perpetuating the focus on women (Daly 2005). Eveline and Bacchi (2010) suggest that it may be the conceptualization of gender as a noun rather than as an action that has resulted in policy focused on women, to the detriment of gender. Instead, conceptualizing gender as a verb would refocus policymakers’ attention on gendering as a social process, one that is “ongoing, contested, and incomplete” (Eveline and Bacchi 2010, 87). Zalewski (2010) points to the deeper problem that “gender mainstreaming suffers from a disconnect with its feminist theoretical groundings” insofar as it remains stuck within the “male-female dichotomy” (24-25).

Another important theoretical criticism of gender mainstreaming is the underlying assumption that state institutions will be open and willing to change. As Daly (2005) explains, it is problematic to assume that “once policy-makers are “enlightened” and the range of policy actors broadened, then gender inequality will be combatted,” without considering the power dynamics inherent to issues of gender inequality (446). In practice, changes are not simply adopted, but rather contested and negotiated, which is reflective of the inherent tension between the goal of gender equality and the current mainstream (Walby 2005). Finally, even if the state achieves exemplary gender mainstreaming, the question remains as to whether state policy alone can sufficiently change deeply-rooted gender inequalities within society.

Within the MENA region specifically, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2014) reports that all countries have adopted some form of gender mainstreaming strategy, particularly in their international commitments, yet this is rarely systematic and is challenged in terms of implementation due to a lack of enabling legislation. A review by UN Women identified a significant gap between gender-responsive planning and its operationalization in Arab countries (Adnane 2015). The report notes that although legislation and constitutional amendments have been made in favor of advancing education, health, and economic empowerment for women, a wider gap exists between policy and practice in the MENA region than in other parts of the world, especially regarding the political empowerment of women. Much of this is attributed to broader cultural attitudes towards women and traditional conceptions of women's roles (UN Women 2015). In Egypt, for example, gender specialists working in the non-profit sector identified "cultural traditions" as part of the challenge in implementing gender mainstreaming, alongside the failure to involve men in attempts to shift cultural norms (Shash and Forden 2016, 80). Furthermore, the organizational structures of nonprofits in different parts of the world, including the MENA, are such that gender mainstreaming is done in order to "tick a box" rather than to create real change (Shash and Forden 2016, 79). As Baruah (2005) explains, gender is often used in this way as "as an additive category," meaning that women are "added" to development programming, and gender is simply "stirred into" existing programs, rather than used as a lens to approach and understand issues of power and inequality (680). Such an additive approach includes, for example, counting how many men or women attended a training, took a loan, or participated in a program. But increased numeric representation of women program beneficiaries is not equal to intersectional and structural gender equality.

The prevalence of this additive approach in gender programming in Jordanian civil society is reflective of the broader pattern of the lag between gender and development theory and its implementation in practice (Baruah 2005; Cornwall 2003). Despite legislation enabling gender equality, such as the 2013-2017 National Strategy for Jordanian Women, the OECD (2014) reported that Jordan had no national gender mainstreaming strategy, suggesting that a more comprehensive government-wide approach is necessary. As one of our interviewees notes, this strategy is not focused on gender but on women and includes no concrete action plans. Other than this national strategy, it is unclear to what extent gender is mainstreamed within CSOs in Jordan. To the best of our knowledge, there is no peer-reviewed literature that assesses CSO gender programming in Jordan. While many international organizations operating in Jordan have global gender mainstreaming strategies and training (see for example GIZ 2013; IDRC and IFAD 2009), an independent assessment of the extent to which this informs their activities and operations in Jordan has not been undertaken. Beyond broad assessments of how gender mainstreaming has been conducted at the regional level in MENA countries (see for example Jad 2003; OECD

2014), it is important to understand and document how gender equality programming has been taken up and implemented in specific countries, including Jordan. This is particularly important given the diverse political realities in the region, and that is precisely the gap that this study in Jordan aims to address.

## METHODS

The findings presented in this paper are based on semi-structured interviews completed in 2015, 2017, and 2019 with staff from 23 international development organizations and CSOs in Jordan. Each interview lasted between 20-60 minutes. We have included international development organizations based in Amman in our study because they rarely work directly with the beneficiaries' country of operation. Rather, they implement their programs through various Jordanian CSOs contingent upon the provision of funding. Furthermore, some organizations, such as the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), work directly with governments and CSOs and influence development policy at the national level, which justifies their inclusion in this study. Since this study was conducted under the aegis of an intergovernmental agricultural organization—the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA)—we primarily sought out organizations working on agriculture, food security, climate resilience, and water management in Jordan. All organizations included in this study have offices in Amman, which is where we conducted the interviews. Gender focal points, gender unit staff,<sup>1</sup> and senior staff members were interviewed wherever possible. The full list of names of organizations and their mandates appears in Annex 1.

A total of 31 respondents are included in this study. The sample includes seven international organizations (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit—GIZ, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), CARE International, FAO, World Food Program (WFP), Mercy Corps, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)) that fund local initiatives, including non-profits, NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and UN-affiliated organizations; eight royal foundations or organizations (Hashemite Fund for the Development of Jordan Badia, Jordanian National Forum for Women, Jordan River Foundation, King Hussein Foundation, Noor Al Hussein Foundation, Tamweelcom, The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development (ZENID)); five government programs, corporations or ministries (ERADA, Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC), Ministry

---

<sup>1</sup> A gender focal point is the most senior staff member who is responsible for implementing gender equality within an organization. Gender unit staff are general staff members assigned to gender units within organizations.

of Agriculture (MOA), Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), Vocational Training Corporation (VTC)); two regional intergovernmental organizations (Arab Women Organization of Jordan (AWO), Regional Centre on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development for the Near East (CARDNE)); and, one non-royal affiliated NGO (Microfund for Women).

Interviews were mostly conducted in English; two interviews were conducted in Arabic and subsequently translated to English. Most interviews were audio recorded; two interviewees declined to be audio recorded, therefore these interviews were documented through our own interview notes. Interviews were not transcribed verbatim. Instead, notes were taken based on themes identified through inductive content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). In this approach, data is classified in an iterative manner depending on the researcher's interpretation.

To share findings from our interviews in this paper, we have honored requests for anonymity from some individuals and organizations. Where permissible, we identify the name of the organization that provided the information, but we never identify individual interviewees. Since only one staff member was interviewed from most organizations, even identifying the name of the organization would be tantamount in some cases to revealing the identity of an informant who may have requested anonymity. We follow what are called Chatham House Rules in reporting interview findings. This is standard practice for reporting data drawn from groups meetings and interviews while abiding by anonymity requests.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We have organized this study's findings under five broad themes: the widespread use of an additive approach to gender and development; a strong focus on anti-poverty and efficiency approaches; community and household-level approaches; the limited engagement of men in gender programming; and the role of Royal NGOs (RONGOs) in simultaneously promoting and obstructing gender equality. Four additional subthemes emerged under the theme of anti-poverty and efficiency approaches: women's economic empowerment, microcredit, entrepreneurship, and home-based businesses for women. We discuss them one at a time, while cognizant of the fact that there are overlaps and commonalities between all the themes and subthemes under which we have organized study findings.

### ***1. An additive approach to gender and development***

Many of the Jordanian organizations we interviewed adopt an "add women and stir"

approach to development programming. This ensures that a certain number of women are included in their activities, and that there is a somewhat equal gender balance amongst their employees. For example, the FAO office in Jordan reportedly takes a “light” approach to gender mainstreaming insofar as having a “fair balance” of women represented amongst both their staff and their projects’ beneficiaries. The FAO interviewee also revealed that the organization has no dedicated gender staff, no internal trainings on gender, and no collaborations with gender-focused organizations. Mercy Corps also focuses on gender balance among their program beneficiaries, which simply means including the same number of men and women in their programs. However, doing so does not necessarily address the underlying ideologies and conditions that result in gender inequality. For example, although its loan programs are open to applications from men and women, Mercy Corps tends to target “heads of households” as a “matter of tradition.” The premise is that targeting the head of households would automatically lead to benefits for other members in the household, thereby rendering the majority of women who are in male headed households invisible, and their needs unaddressed. Therefore, while the organizations may work with both women and men, implicit gender biases often prevent them from implementing gender equitable programming. Similarly, the Hashemite Fund for the Development of Jordan Badia limits its gender equality strategy to ensure that at least 30% of its staff and project beneficiaries are women. No further effort is made to explore how and whether women benefit from their programming. In reference to their project “Water Wise Women,” which is housed at the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, a GIZ interviewee noted that there is no gender strategy at the level of the ministry; rather, gender mainstreaming is a donor-driven initiative. The interviewee goes on to suggest that “the primary need is to work on attitudinal change [...] at the individual level,” thereby firmly placing the responsibility for change outside of GIZ’s institutional purview. The Jordan River Foundation (JRF) takes an anti-poverty approach to its work, which translates into primarily income-generating activities based on skills traditionally acquired by women, such as cheese-making, and targeting women as beneficiaries for their loan program.

Overall, gender programming within most organizations in Jordan does not appear to be implemented in a deliberate, proactive, or organized way. Although most of the organizations interviewed note the importance of gender in their programming, there is often little concrete action to support this claim: they do not ensure regular gender trainings, hire gender focal points, or develop and operationalize gender equality strategies. During our interview with ERADA (“will power” in Arabic), respondents emphasized that gender equality is the organization’s main concern in all areas of operation in Jordan. Although ERADA’s commitment to gender equality is always emphasized in its monthly and annual reporting, staff members, when asked, were unable to provide details of how a commitment to gender equality is incorporated into specific aspects

of ERADA's work, beyond the fact that its vocational training and capacity building programs also include some women. Thus, perhaps justifiably, there is no mention of gender programming or mainstreaming on ERADA's website. Similarly, ACC staff reported carrying out gender equality activities "all the time" as they are "highly recommended" by government institutions, yet the interviewee could not provide a specific example of gender equality programming or training offered by the organization. Likewise, the King Hussein Foundation (KHF) does not have a formal or explicit gender strategy, though when interviewed, their staff stated that their projects aim to achieve economic and social empowerment for women. The KHF interviewee considered women's involvement to be implicitly addressed and embedded in KHF's work though she did also emphasize that the organization lacks the tools and deliberate strategies to ensure that they are consistently gender-aware and responsive: "We do it because it's part of our commitment, but we don't do it in an organized manner."

The lack of a formal approach to, and strategy for, achieving gender equality is worrying, given that projects are affected by internal biases of project/program managers, and organizational staff more generally. The effects of such biases have already been documented. In their review of gender programming in the MENA region, the OECD (2014) highlighted that gender mainstreaming is often resisted by certain senior staff members and decision-makers within the organization, who object to more progressive approaches to gender equality. In the case of Egypt, staff members similarly resisted gender mainstreaming because of individual biases and prejudices, as well as rigid organizational structures (Shash and Forden 2016). In Jordan, Ferguson (2017) found that women's organizations avoid political engagement, as many of their leaders have strong ties to the Jordanian regime and appear preoccupied with maintaining their social status rather than enacting change.

Moreover, our findings indicate that gender trainings for organization and program staff are generally outdated or inadequate, and in some cases non-existent. Unsurprisingly, this contributes to a poor operationalization of gender programming, even when gender is a stated priority. At the Hashemite Fund for the Development of Jordan Badia, the interviewee noted that the lack of gender training is the most significant barrier to improving gender mainstreaming within the organization.

Organizational structures of NGOs and the availability of funding, which is generally tied to project-based cycles, also present limitations for meaningful programmatic engagement with gender equality. These funding cycles shape priorities, as projects require measurable and quantifiable results within the relatively short duration of the project. As noted by Shash and Forden (2016), organizations must go beyond short-term approaches, as gender mainstreaming requires long-term planning that targets "resistance

and sexist organizational culture” (79). This is precisely the issue that Jad (2003) recognizes in her critique of NGOs in the Middle East, which remain development- and project-oriented, and therefore ineffective in fostering systemic change. As Jad (2003) explains, projects are often “limited, localized, and implemented by professionals” with narrow responsibilities, divorced from practical concerns like budgeting and organization, and strategic concerns such as the overall mission (44). Accountability to timetables, budgets, and funders constrain the potential for larger-scale movements (Jad 2007). Recent findings from Jordan confirm that contemporary women’s movements remain institutionalized as NGOs, which are tightly bound by state-mandated parameters (Ferguson and Apsani 2017).

Furthermore, the lack of accountability for implementing gender equality transcends organizational and national levels. For example, the interviewee from MOPIC noted that, with respect to the National Strategy for Jordanian Women, there is no “action plan to implement this strategy and this is a problem for all of our strategies—that we have strategies and we have good documents, but we can’t implement them.” She suggested that this is because of a lack of financial resources, and because of more systemic structural issues around regulation and reporting. Similarly, staff members are unlikely to integrate gender into their work if there are no hard reporting requirements. These limitations are not unique to Jordan or the MENA region. For example, Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2009) found that when it comes to the adoption and operationalization of gender mainstreaming within the European Union, soft incentives are not nearly as effective as hard incentives with consequences, be they negative or positive.

It is also important to note that while some international organizations such as the World Food Program (WFP) have gender strategies and gender training at the global and international levels, our interviewees confirmed that they do not impose any gender requirements on their national partners for diplomatic reasons. Therefore, the national partner of WFP is not responsible for the implementation of any gender equality activities in Jordan. Overall, our findings indicate that despite having many more resources to support gender equality than local organizations, international organizations such as FAO, GIZ, UNDP, Mercy Corps, and WFP employ some of the weakest gender mainstreaming initiatives in Jordan. They often do not have any gender equality strategy in Jordan beyond the imperative of “balancing” the gender of their staff. Therefore, the availability of funds and resources within international development organizations often does not translate into concrete strategies and action in support of gender equality in the Jordanian context.

While our findings indicate an overall weak operationalization of gender mainstreaming, it is important to note that a few organizations are aware of how their institutional

structures and place in Jordanian civil society limit their ability to effectively institute more progressive gender strategies. For example, the Arab Women's Organization (AWO) explained how their activities have changed from a rights-based approach to a more project-based approach, which is consistent with the NGOization of the Arab women's movement as described above. The movement became more institutionalized beginning "in the 1990s when there was promotion in Jordan for civil society organizations [...] and so we started thinking of aggregating the efforts of women's NGOs" (Interviewee, AWO). This made it easier for the AWO to operate in Jordan, given the size and strength of the country's CSO sector; but AWO continues to advocate for political and legal rights—seemingly one of the few organizations in Jordan that do so. Overall, women's organizations in Jordan remain largely isolated from other organizations and larger movements; they are depoliticized and conservative, restricted by mandates limited to social assistance and poverty alleviation (Ferguson 2017).

## ***2. A strong focus on anti-poverty and efficiency approaches to gender and development***

Although gender and development theory has moved on from welfare, anti-poverty, and efficiency-based approaches—which focused on women's reproductive and productive roles as wives and mothers, and their instrumentality in achieving development goals—to approaches focused on questioning and challenging unequal structural power hierarchies and relations between women and men, these earlier approaches to development persist in practice (Adnane 2015; Baruah 2005; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall 2003). They have also been reinstated more recently under the guise of "smart economics," which advocates "investing" in women for their utility in addressing broader national and global human development goals (Chant and Sweetman 2012, 517). This approach results in projects that simply address the gap between men and women's material conditions by integrating women into existing economic structures, as opposed to addressing women's position in society that is contingent upon that very same economic structure (Baruah 2005). That this approach provides relatively easy policy and technical fixes for the issue of gender inequality also explains its popularity in government and CSO programming. Further, the inclusion of women as a means to improve development effectiveness places the burden of development on women, and suggests that women are "merely instrumental" to development goals (Baruah 2005, 678). As summarized by Chant and Sweetman (2012), relying on women "to guarantee business as usual, let alone transform the world, demands super-human sacrifices in terms of time, labor, energy, and other resources" (521).

Our results confirm Ferguson's (2017) finding that many CSOs in Jordan have a narrow focus that is limited to addressing social welfare issues, specifically women's economic

empowerment. The focus of most organizations in our study continues to be on poverty alleviation, the provision of loans, entrepreneurship, and vocational training, as opposed to social mobilization, advocacy, or rights-based approaches. Of the 23 organizations interviewed for this study, 11 were involved in some form of microcredit or loan program as part of their activities. Some organizations, such as KHF, have also shifted from non-monetary support for income-generating activities, including vocational and skills training, to financing-only approaches, focused on revolving micro loans. The ACC and JRF use microcredit programs to curb poverty through income generation and limiting unemployment. The Microfund for Women, whose entire mandate focuses on improving the lives of women, also takes a narrow income-based approach, aiming to socially and economically empower women by improving their economic contributions to their families. Similarly, Tamweelcom understands gender equality as primarily achievable through the inclusion of women in the economy, beyond which no attempt is made to change the position or roles of women within the household or the community. The majority of their beneficiaries are women, who are granted small business loans to support traditional activities such as handicrafts, livestock rearing, and cheese production, which accommodate, rather than alleviate, the burden of reproductive labor, which is disproportionately borne by women. Though some organizations focus on improving family income by other means, they tend to defer to integrating women into existing institutions and social hierarchies. For example, the Vocational Training Corporation, Hashemite Fund for the Development of Jordan Badia, and the Jordanian National Forum for Women also take an efficiency-oriented approach, focusing on incorporating women into the wage economy through skills and employment training.

In the pages that follow, we lay out some specific patterns and practices that emerge as a result of Jordanian CSOs' concerted focus on anti-poverty and efficiency approaches to gender equality and development.

### ***Women's economic empowerment***

When women are only viewed as economic contributors to the family, the extent to which an improvement in their income will lead to a transformation of existing gender dynamics is debatable. Yet, many of the organizations we interviewed seemed to subscribe to this instrumental and apolitical understanding of women's empowerment. For example, the Noor Al Hussein Foundation and the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development (ZENID) interviewees emphasized that economic empowerment is the most effective strategy for changing the gender roles of women within both the household and society. They believed that when a woman is economically empowered, it changes "her way of talking, her way of thinking [...] her relationship with her family, with her husband. They support each other, he gives her time to work and he performs

other roles [...] that are expected from women.” They also advance the assumption that women gain a sense of achievement from income generation that changes household power dynamics, decision-making, gender roles, and the allocation of resources. Despite such assertions about the importance of women’s economic empowerment, we found that there was little support from the same NGOs for Jordanian women who are already engaged in economic activities that are lucrative but traditionally deemed masculine (Najjar, Baruah, and Al-Jawhari 2019). The implementation of programs aimed at women’s economic empowerment by CSOs in Jordan appear to be strongly influenced by entrenched patriarchal societal norms that view women as helpers to their husbands but not as co-breadwinners.

Contrary to the frequent assertion that the mere inclusion of women in income-generating projects contributes to women’s empowerment, the interviewee from JOHUD pointed out that men are often responsible for selling and marketing goods, and may therefore control the flow of income even when women are producing the goods. She acknowledged that this may limit the extent to which household dynamics of power and control may be altered even when women contribute to the household economically. Furthermore, the Jordanian National Forum for Women interviewee noted that when women earn an income, they tend to invest money in the family’s immediate economic needs, while men may want to invest their own as well as their wives’ income in property or vehicles. Since men often purchase such items in their own names, even when they are using their wives’ savings, earning an income may not translate into assets in a woman’s name, and therefore may not mean a better bargaining position for her within the household. The JRF also confirms that while women make up 60% of its beneficiaries, they often rely on male relatives as guarantors; therefore, the extent to which women exert control over their business and income is questionable. This is consistent with findings in other contexts where women take on the liability and risk of debt, while the loan tends to be primarily controlled by their male relatives (Goetz and Gupta 1996).

These findings support Chant and Sweetman’s (2012) suggestion that it is an oversimplification to “assume a much smoother and easier transition between individual “economic empowerment” and engaging with the social and political structures which constrain individuals” (523). Similarly, Ababneh (2016) argues that economic issues are too often considered separate from political issues. By depoliticizing poverty, we obfuscate the “political nature of neoliberal economic policies” (89). Thus, while anti-poverty and efficiency-based approaches have been criticized for their narrow apolitical approach, some projects focused on improving the economic livelihoods of women in Jordan can spur political mobilization if the issue is of immediate and practical concern to women.

### ***Micro-credit programs***

The theoretical debate about the usefulness of livelihood generation and economic improvement to gender equality is no more relevant than in the case of micro-credit programs, which remain popular among the organizations included in this study. Such programs typically channel small amounts of money for low-income families, through women, to survive on while ignoring the structural factors that create poverty and inequality in the first place. Based on evidence from beneficiaries of microcredit programs in Egypt, Drolet (2011) concludes that while these programs help women meet some of their immediate practical needs, they do not empower women in the longer term, as they often only support women's work in the informal economy, and therefore cannot replace formal employment. The women in Drolet's study found that their income did not lead to any changes in their position or decision-making power within their households; they also received no recognition or assistance for their unpaid reproductive work (Drolet 2011). Interestingly, however, Kabeer's (2001) work in Bangladesh highlights how empowerment as a result of loan programs can occur both through the process and outcome of women taking out loans. She argues that empowerment is a complex notion that requires a more nuanced analysis of how a woman's "range of choices" is expanded through microfinance, which has the potential to improve some, but not all, women's lives (Kabeer 2001, 81). We found no evidence of such critical reflection on the potential and limitations of microcredit and its variable potential for women's empowerment in our interviews with Jordanian organizations, demonstrating the need for more reflexivity as part of their practice.

### ***Entrepreneurship programs***

Among the organizations included in this study, there was a major focus on promoting entrepreneurship among beneficiaries. This is deemed desirable because it encourages people to not rely on salaried employment, even as it places the onus on individuals to support themselves while freeing the state and the private sector of their responsibilities to create and provide secure employment. For example, the National Jordanian Forum for Women supports women's entrepreneurship through a strategy that specifically encourages people to rely less on government employment and to return to live in rural areas of Jordan. While providing the skills and support to improve people's livelihoods is undoubtedly important, such approaches raise questions around whether encouraging survival entrepreneurship, in other words entrepreneurship motivated by poverty and lack of other viable employment opportunities (Langevang, Namatovu, and Dawa 2012), may be a way for the state to absolve itself of its responsibility for job creation. Further, migration to urban areas may boost enterprise and agricultural development in rural settings through remittances (Abdelali-Martini and Hamza 2014). Therefore,

encouraging people to return to rural areas after acquiring vocational skills may not be the only effective strategy of enabling rural development. The reality of entrepreneurial motivations is complex as there is an interplay between structural forces and agency in such decision-making, particularly in countries where labor laws and job security are poor (Langevang, Namatovu and Dawa 2012). Our analysis suggests that organizations in Jordan pushing for entrepreneurship fail to take a nuanced or reflexive approach that sufficiently recognizes both the agency of beneficiaries and significant structural constraints, such as poverty and high levels of unemployment in rural areas. Some have suggested that these tensions could be addressed through critical engagement between civil society and the state, a role which international organizations are well-placed to facilitate (Sholkamy 2010), but there is presently no evidence of such engagement taking place in Jordan.

### *Home-based livelihoods for women*

The interventions described by our interviewees are also designed to help women earn an income without leaving their homes, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging the unequal familial and social positions of men and women. Such an approach meshes well with existing cultural and religious traditions in Jordan that still firmly place women within the home as domestic caregivers (Alfarhan 2015). Many of the CSOs interviewed in this study tailored their programs to encourage women to integrate into the productive economy through entrepreneurial home-based businesses, so as not to interfere with their current position and role within the family. Some CSOs justified this based on the need to appeal to heteronormative nuclear family values, which are central to Jordanian identity. Similar types of appeals to patriarchal familial norms were used to justify the need for women's involvement in economic activities over other approaches that demand the rights and entitlements of women as individuals or citizens. For example, an ERADA interviewee noted that the organization focuses on women's work because the "security of the family is the main concern of the woman, not the man." Women are not viewed as separate from the family unit to which they belong, and therefore the rationale is that they must also make contributions to family income. One CARE interviewee noted that community-based projects have the best results, precisely because women are restricted in terms of mobility, and home-based businesses are more socially acceptable. Some organizations, such as ACC and JOHUD, also seemed to endorse patriarchal family values by downplaying the fact that women may experience disadvantages in terms of earning and controlling income. Speaking about their livestock support program for women, JOHUD emphasized that requiring women to open bank accounts (as a means to secure direct access to and control over their income) is unnecessary since the money will ultimately be spent on the household, regardless of who is in control. Other organizations acknowledged the complexity of the

issues involved in gender and family relations. The ZENID interviewee, for example, notes that all economic empowerment projects for women are located within the home, at least initially, because women themselves prefer this approach, and because it is unrealistic to assume that women need to be completely independent: “We cannot start with the assumption that we need the woman to be independent without any effect on the males in her house, because it will not work, because they are a family, because they are living together, and they should share everything together.” They saw women as part of a couple and a family first, and highlighted the importance of working with men to avoid alienating them and “breaking up the family.” Several interviewees emphasized that such a strategy can also strategically help “empowered” women avoid backlash from the family and community. Yet, focusing on home-based businesses as the sole means to empower women does not address or even engage with the current imbalances of intrahousehold power between women and men (Baruah 2005).

### ***3. Community and household level approaches***

Community-based approaches aimed at income generation are popular in Jordan due to widespread assumptions that women are more effective at leading change within communities. This was a recurring theme in our interviews, where women were often perceived as more serious (ACC; UNDP); reliable (CARE); responsible (Mercy Corps); productive (ERADA; JOHUD); credible and committed (CARE); and more community-oriented (JRF) than men, especially when it comes to loan repayment. Other interviewees note women have the “drive to prove themselves,” and are “committed initiators” who are “dedicated” to improving the lives of their children (The King Hussein Foundation). This focus on women’s social roles as care workers and community organizers is also evident in the approach of the JRF, whose interviewee suggested that women propose more equitable, care-focused projects that are of greater benefit to the community, while men tend to suggest projects that are individualistic and benefit fewer people. This is a good example of an efficiency-based approach that leverages women’s “essential” qualities to improve interventions. Indeed, much of the literature on microfinance notes that women are perceived as more trustworthy, and therefore more likely to pay back loans, and have greater community impact (Agarwal, Goodell and Selleck 2015; Agier and Szafarz 2010; Kabeer 2001). Agarwal et al. (2015) note that this assumption is not empirical. Rather, it rests on the assumption that women are naturally more responsible, especially in relation to familial and household affairs. While women may be conditioned to be more compliant in loan repayment (Kabeer 2001), the assumption that women are more reliable and responsible places the heavier burden of development on women (Jackson 2002; Chant and Sweetman 2012). This is exemplified by the Jordanian National Forum for Women’s assertion that they are often required to adopt projects where organizations have downloaded project responsibility onto communities

that do not have the capacity to continue them, many of which are focused on low-paid feminized economic activities, such as yogurt-making, cheese-making, or gardening. Moreover, approaches that essentialize women are also problematic because they do not recognize that one woman's needs may differ from another, and from those of men in the same families (Baruah 2010). Organizations that further such narratives may purport to mainstream gender in their work, however in practice their approaches may do the opposite.

Some organizations interviewed here, such as the ACC, did not recognize the need for individual or intrahousehold approaches, noting that, "Jordanians are like a family, we are family... a man and a wife, children... We are not talking about problems for a single member of the family." In other words, ACC's loan programs are not designed to meet the priorities of women, but rather the needs of the entire family, and the development of the economy as a whole. Similarly, the Jordanian Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) interprets gender equality and women's empowerment as "the raising of the living standard for the whole family, and allowing women to play a role in increasing income." As an example, this interviewee emphasizes that one of MOA's most successful projects was a home gardening training program that allowed women to "run a project around [their] house, meaning [they were] able to raise [their] kids and work at the same time." This is indicative not only of the failure of such programs to consider women's needs as individuals, but also their tendency to create additional labor for women, and to have their needs absorbed into the needs of the whole household. Nonetheless, the MOA does acknowledge that there is a strategic advantage to framing its work this way since it can serve to increase men's buy-in if the project is presented as being beneficial for the family rather than as an issue of women's rights. Other authors have emphasized that there may be less resistance to women taking part in income-generating activities because they are considered a win-win for the family (Agarwal 2003). While men may not challenge such activities at all, they are likely to be far more resistant to deeper economic and political demands from women—for independent land and property rights, for example—that challenge their traditional privileges and entitlement to resources. While framing projects within existing gender norms is a way to make progress on women's practical needs, the issue remains that, in Jordan, there are no separate women's organizations or movements working towards the strategic changes needed to facilitate a social and political shift in the position of women (Jad 2003; Ferguson 2017).

#### ***4. Does "gender and development" programming also include men?***

Although the inclusion of men is necessary for challenging unequal gender norms, CSOs in the MENA region still tend to take a "women-only" approach to development and gender equality (Adnane 2015). This is perhaps part of the persistent legacy left

by the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), and the integration of women in development, as a response to male bias in the development process (Chant and Gutmann 2002). Our findings confirm that most organizations in Jordan continue to take a women-only approach. This is evident even at the national level. The interviewee from MOPIC noted that the National Strategy for Jordanian Women focuses only on women, whereas “a gender approach means that we should look at women and men.” As discussed in the introduction of this paper, focusing solely on women, as opposed to gender relations, undermines the potential breadth and relevance of the gender and development approach as it fails to adequately consider the ways in which gender inequality is embedded in social systems (Harding 1995). Moreover, it contributes to the assumption that women are solely responsible for issues such as gender violence, childcare, or family planning, thereby placing the burden of dismantling the patriarchy in the hands of women alone, and not men (Chant and Gutmann 2002).

Very few organizations included in this study seemed to appreciate the importance of addressing gender inequality rather than just “women’s issues.” The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) recognize the need to focus on gender relations in a way that engages both men and women. However, in practice, they seemed to consider gender only insofar as the gender balance of their employees and beneficiaries is concerned. Despite the inclusion of both men and women in equal numbers in their programs, this example reflects how, in practice, gender mainstreaming remains stuck within the gender binary. The Arab Women’s Organization takes a more political approach that goes beyond simply integrating women into existing projects by, for example, pushing for quotas for women in the government and advocating for equal salaries, pensions, and health insurance for both women and men. Although their focus is still solely on women, this form of advocacy does engage gender relations by acknowledging the structural economic and political disadvantages faced by women. The Noor Al-Hussein Foundation also recognizes the importance of engaging men in gender equality work. The interviewee from the organization explained that many Jordanian women tend to internalize oppressive gender roles and hierarchies. She suggested that engaging men may help address the issue of girls’ school attendance and completion, as it is often mothers who, having themselves not benefited from a formal education, encourage their daughters to drop out of school. This is consistent with Kandiyoti’s (1988) view that Middle Eastern women often become complicit in enforcing gender norms intergenerationally. Beyond these limited examples of willingness to consider gender, rather than just women, we found very little evidence of engagement with men or structural inequality in Jordanian CSOs. The continued reliance on women-only approaches to gender equality suggests a continued lag between the theory and practice of gender and development (Baruah, 2005).

### ***5. Royal NGOs and gender mainstreaming***

Finally, our findings suggest that the relationships and interactions between the state and CSOs in Jordan are complex. On the one hand, it appears that the monarchy sometimes implements progressive gender policies. For example, the mainstreaming of gender in JOHUD, albeit in its limited apolitical form, was at the behest of the King of Jordan. Furthermore, several royal organizations seem to take a somewhat more critical approach to gender issues, such as the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation (founded by royal decree) and the Arab Women's Organization (AWO), whose Jordanian Executive Council Member is part of the royal family. These royal organizations seem to be filling a void in gender mainstreaming that has not been advanced by, for example, international organizations, which are often assumed to pursue more progressive and democratic gender strategies. For example, the AWO takes a more strongly political position, advocating for gender equity in government employment, equal salaries, pensions, and health insurance for women, an approach that acknowledges the structural disadvantages faced by women. Unlike other organizations included in this study, the Noor Al Hussein Foundation takes care to include men, as well as women, in their attempt to "change mindsets," which is an important aspect of gender mainstreaming. However, for a variety of financial and practical reasons, such organizations have simultaneously shifted towards project-based interventions aimed at women, and away from rights-based approaches that engage gender relations.

It is also important to critically evaluate the extent to which gender programming driven by RONGOs may be part of the façade of democracy. Our findings confirm the continued role of the state in controlling the operations of CSOs. For example, JOHUD reported that the government wanted to engage women as community spokespersons to disseminate certain messages to their local communities for a water conservation initiative. Though JOHUD advised the government against using women as "soldiers for extending the reach of the government," this example illustrates the ongoing influence of the state over CSOs as well as the tendency to engage women to advance state objectives. Interestingly, the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation considers itself a non-governmental, "grassroots" organization despite its alignment with the monarchy, further illustrating how the lines between "non-governmental" organizations and state operations become blurry. This blurring is also evident from the fact that relatives of presidents and ministers in the Arab world, Jordan included, often establish their own CSOs to provide services relinquished by the state (Jad 2003). This raises concern as to whether and how gender mainstreaming is being leveraged to pay lip service to progress while obstructing real change. Further research and scholarly inquiry into RONGOs in Jordan is highly recommended.

## **6. Conclusions**

Gender equality became a focus in Jordan after the establishment of the Jordanian National Commission for Women in 1992, alongside a broader “gendering of the agenda” at global conferences throughout the early 1990s, particularly since the 1995 UN Beijing Women’s Conference (Friedman 2003, 313). This was the beginning of what is now a global focus on developing and implementing policies and strategies that mainstream gender. Despite 30 years of gender equality programming, practice still lags behind theory, and very little progress has been made in the operationalization of gender mainstreaming in Jordan. Our findings suggest that an apolitical, additive approach to gender remains dominant among Jordanian CSOs. Many organizations pay “lip service” to the idea of more progressive gender approaches, but these remain unfulfilled in the absence of gender mainstreaming at the organizational level. Income-based and anti-poverty approaches remain the most prevalent tools for pursuing gender equality in Jordan, whereby women are integrated into economic initiatives for the instrumental purpose of improving family income and “lifting” Jordanians out of poverty. Such approaches may have some merit in modestly alleviating poverty and improving living standards, but they tend to conflate gender inequality solely with poverty, and are buoyed by essentialist assumptions about women’s sincerity, reliability, and altruism. Very few organizations take an approach to gender equality that explicitly targets social and political power imbalances based on gender. Most organizations do not engage men or the state in their gender equality programming; these exclusions further undermine the breadth, relevance, and sustainability of gender equality initiatives. Finally, our findings suggest that the structures and hierarchies within which Jordanian CSOs operate are themselves deterrents for the advancement and implementation of progressive gender equality agendas. The blurred line in Jordan between domestic CSOs (with or without the support of international organizations), the monarchy, and the defensive democratization pursued by the Jordanian state have undermined and stifled the potential for greater CSO engagement with a broader repertoire of social, political, and legal gender inequalities. We hope that the issues identified in this study will provide the grounding and detail against which future research and advocacy for gender equality programming within CSOs in Jordan can be tested, verified, and advanced.

## Bibliography

- Ababneh, Sara. 2016. "Troubling the Political: Women in the Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (1): 87–112.
- Abdelali-Martini, Malika, and Raid Hamza. 2014. "How Do Migration Remittances Affect Rural Livelihoods in Drylands?" *Journal of International Development* 26 (4): 454–70.
- Adnane, Souad. 2015. "Economic Freedom and Women's Emancipation in the MENA Region." *Economic Affairs* 35 (3): 416–27.
- Agarwal, Bina. 2003. "Gender and Land Rights Revisited: Exploring New Prospects via the State, Family and Market." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3 (1-2): 184–224.
- Aggarwal, Raj, John W Goodell, and Lauren J Selleck. 2015. "Lending to Women in Microfinance: Role of Social Trust." *International Business Review* 24 (1): 55–65.
- Agier, Isabelle, and Ariane Szafarz. 2010. "Credit to Women Entrepreneurs: The Curse of the Trust-worthier Sex." Available at SSRN 1718574.
- Al-Ali, Nadje. 2003. "Gender and Civil Society in the Middle East." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5 (2): 216–32.
- Alfarhan, Usamah F. 2015. "Gender Earnings Discrimination in Jordan: Good Intentions Are Not Enough." *International Labour Review* 154 (4): 563–80.
- Alvarez, Sonia E. 1990. "Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives on Women's Movements and the State." In *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics*, 19–35. Princeton University Press.
- Baruah, Bipasha. 2005. "Gender and Development in South Asia: Can Practice Keep up with Theory?" *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue Canadienne D'études Du Développement* 26 (sup1): 677–88.
- Baruah, Bipasha. 2010. *Women and Property in Urban India*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Ben Néfissa, Sarah. 2005. "NGOs and Governance in the Arab World."
- Booth, Christine, and Cinnamon Bennett. 2002. "Gender mainstreaming in the European Union: towards a new conception and practice of equal opportunities?" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9 (4): 430–446.
- Carapico, Sheila. 2000. "NGOs, INGOs, Go-NGOs and Do-NGOs: Making Sense of Non-Governmental Organizations." *Middle East Report* 214 30 (1): 12.
- Chant, Sylvia, and Matthew C Gutmann. 2002. "Men-Streaming'gender? Questions for Gender and Development Policy in the Twenty-First Century." *Progress in Development Studies* 2 (4): 269–82.
- Chant, Sylvia, and Caroline Sweetman. 2012. "Fixing Women or Fixing the world?'Smart Economics', Efficiency Approaches, and Gender Equality in Development." *Gender & Development* 20 (3): 517–29.
- Charlesworth, Hilary. 2005. "Not Waving but Drowning: Gender Mainstreaming and Human Rights in the United Nations." *Harv. Hum Rts. J.* 18: 1.
- Chowdhury, Elora Halim. 2011. *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*. Suny Press.
- Clark, Janine A, and Wacheke M Michuki. 2009. "Women and NGO Professionalisation: A Case Study of Jordan." *Development in Practice* 19 (3): 329–39.
- Cornwall, Andrea. 2003. "Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development." *World Development* 31 (8): 1325–42.

- Daly, Mary. 2005. "Gender Mainstreaming in Theory and Practice." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 12 (3): 433–50.
- Drolet, Julie. 2011. "Women, Micro Credit and Empowerment in Cairo, Egypt." *International Social Work* 54 (5): 629–45.
- Elo, Satu, and Helvi Kyngäs. 2008. "The Qualitative Content Analysis Process." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62 (1): 107–15.
- Eveline, J, and C. Bacchi. 2010. "What Are We Mainstreaming When We Mainstream Gender?" In *Mainstreaming Politics: Gendering Practices and Feminist Theory*, 87–109.
- Ferguson, Peter A. 2017. "The State of Jordanian Women's Organizations-Five Years Beyond the Arab Spring." *Politics and Governance* 5 (2): 59-68.
- Ferguson, Peter A., and Rishita Apsani. 2013. "Can the Arab Spring Empower Women? A View from Inside Women's Organizations in Jordan." In *Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association*.
- Friedman, Elisabeth Jay. 2003. "Gendering the Agenda: The Impact of the Transnational Women's Rights Movement at the UN Conferences of the 1990s." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, 26:313–31.
- GIZ. 2013. "Gender Sensitive Value Chains in the MENA Region: Final Report."
- Goetz, Anne Marie, and Rina Sen Gupta. 1996. "Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power, and Control over Loan Use in Rural Credit Programs in Bangladesh." *World Development* 24 (1): 45–63.
- Gubser, Peter. 2002. "The Impact of NGOs on State and Non-State Relations in the Middle East." *Middle East Policy* 9 (1): 139–48.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M, and Mark A Pollack. 2009. "Mainstreaming Gender in the European Union: Getting the Incentives Right." *Comparative European Politics* 7 (1): 114–38.
- Harding, Sandra (ed.) 1987. *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Harding, Sandra. 1995. "Just add women and stir?." In *Missing links: Gender equity in science and technology for development*. International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, ON, CA.
- IDRC, IFAD. 2009. "Mainstreaming Gender in Development Projects in Middle-East and North Africa." <https://idrl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/44453/130911.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Jackson, Cecile. 2002. "Disciplining Gender?" *World Development* 30 (3): 497–509.
- Jad, Islah. 2004. "The NGO-isation of Arab Women's Movements." [https://journals.scholarsportal.info/pdf/02655012/v35i0004/34\\_tnoawm.xml](https://journals.scholarsportal.info/pdf/02655012/v35i0004/34_tnoawm.xml).
- Jad, Islah. 2003. "The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements." *Al-Raida Journal*, 38–47.
- Jad, Islah. 2007. "NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements." *Development in Practice* 17 (4–5): 622–29.
- Kabeer, Naila. 2001. "Conflicts over Credit: Re-Evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh." *World Development* 29 (1): 63–84.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender & Society* 2 (3): 274–90.
- Langevang, Thilde, Rebecca Namatovu, and Samuel Dawa. 2012. "Beyond Necessity and Opportunity Entrepreneurship: Motivations and Aspirations of Young Entrepreneurs in Uganda." *International Development Planning Review* 34 (4): 439–60.
- Meier, Petra, and Karen Celis. 2011. "Sowing the Seeds of Its Own Failure: Implementing the Concept of Gender Mainstreaming." *Social Politics* 18 (4): 469–89.

Milton-Edwards, Beverley. 1993. "Façade Democracy and Jordan." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20 (2): 191–203.

Molyneux, Maxine. 1998. "Analysing Women's Movements." In *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender*, edited by C. Jackson and R. Pearson. London: Routledge.

Mósesdóttir, Lilja, and Rósa G Erlingsdóttir. 2005. "Spreading the Word across Europe: Gender Mainstreaming as a Political and Policy Project." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7 (4): 513–31.

Najjar, Dina, Bipasha Baruah, and Nadira Al-Jawhari. 2019. "Decision-Making Power of Women in Livestock and Dairy Production in Jordan." Lebanon: International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA).

OECD. 2014. *Women in Public Life: Gender, Law and Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/women-in-public-life/embedding-gender-considerations-in-public-policies-across-the-mena-region\\_9789264224636-8-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/women-in-public-life/embedding-gender-considerations-in-public-policies-across-the-mena-region_9789264224636-8-en).

Rai, Shirin M. 2002. *Gender and the Political Economy of Development*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

Rathgeber, Eva M. 1990. "WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice." *The Journal of Developing Areas* 24 (4): 489–502.

Robinson, Glenn E. 1998. "Defensive Democratization in Jordan." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30 (3): 387–410.

Shash, Farah Gamal, and Carie L. Forden. 2016. "Gender Equality in a Time of Change: Gender Mainstreaming after Egypt's Arab Spring." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, 56:74–82.

Sholkamy, Hania. 2010. "No Path to Power: Civil Society, State Services, and the Poverty of City Women." *IDS Bulletin* 41 (2): 46–53.

United Nations. "Civil Society." Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/resources-different-audiences/civil-society/index.html>

UN Women. 2015. "Arab Regional Synthesis Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action Twenty Years Later."

Walby, Sylvia. 2005. "Gender mainstreaming: Productive tensions in theory and practice." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 12 (2): 321–343.

Waylen, Georgina. 1993. "Women's Movements and Democratisation in Latin America." *Third World Quarterly* 14 (3): 573–87.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 1999. "The Limits of Democracy in the Middle East: The Case of Jordan." *The Middle East Journal* (53) 4: 606–20.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2000. "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan." *Comparative Politics*, 43–61.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2002. "The Political Limits to Nongovernmental Organizations in Jordan." *World Development* 30 (1): 77–93.

Zalewski, Marysia. 2010. "'I don't even know what gender is': a discussion of the connections between gender, gender mainstreaming and feminist theory." *Review of International Studies* 36 (1): 3–27.

## *Annex 1*

### Full names and mandate of organizations included in the study

- (1) Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) focuses on water and waste management, resource conservation, as well as education, vocational training, and education.
- (2) The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is focused on the eradication of poverty, acceleration of structural transformations, and the building of resilience to shocks and crises. As part of the sustainable development goals, women's empowerment and gender equality is also one of its focal points.
- (3) CARE in Jordan focuses on poverty and social justice, microfinance, and improving market access.
- (4) The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is focused on income generation and food security through the support of the agricultural sector, including through climate smart agriculture, and building capacity in the field of water use and arable land.
- (5) The World Food Program (WFP) works on humanitarian support, social protection programs, and improving food security through livelihood support and income-generating programs.
- (6) Mercy Corps provides vocational, educational, and entrepreneurial training and support, as well as working on water use behaviors.
- (7) The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) works on climate change resilience in Jordan, and is committed to supporting community water, energy, and environmentally-friendly farming initiatives.
- (8) The Hashemite Fund for the Development of Jordan Badia has the objective of contributing to the sustainable development of the Badia (arid areas) through environmental, social, and economic projects, as well as support of CSOs.
- (9) The Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW) is headed by Princess Basma and identifies itself as a grassroots women's movement that aims to advocate for women's rights, and increase women's participation in decision-making.
- (10) The Jordan River Foundation (JRF) works on community economic development by increasing household income, as well as offering business and entrepreneurship training, and supporting social enterprises, particularly for women (e.g. handicrafts).
- (11) The King Hussein Foundation encompasses the Noor Al Hussein Foundation and Tamweelcom, and aims to create economic opportunities and build capacity for self-reliance through national and regional level programs.
- (12) The Noor Al Hussein Foundation focuses on improving livelihoods through poverty alleviation, job creation, microfinance, income-generating enterprises, business development, sustainable community development, and advocacy.
- (13) Tamweelcom is a micro-credit organization whose objective is to empower small and micro-entrepreneurs through business and retail loans.
- (14) The Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) is a royal-affiliated non-profit organization comprised of 51 community development centers. While in the past it focused on poverty and women's rights through social support and community development programs, more recently, it prioritizes youth unemployment and marginalization.
- (15) The Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development (ZENID) operates under JOHUD and provides development-oriented training, capacity building, and research.

- (16) ERADA, funded by MOPIC, is a nation-wide program focused on enhancing social and economic productivity by investing in small businesses and offering entrepreneurial support such as training and marketing services.
- (17) The Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC) operates under the Ministry of Agriculture and is focused on agricultural and rural development through the provision of capital to finance agricultural projects.
- (18) The Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) is comprised of three sub entities, namely the National Centre for Agricultural Research and Extension (NCARE), the Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC) and the Jordanian Cooperative Corporation. These entities are focused on improving agricultural efficiency and development, sustainably managing the environment and natural resources, providing financing for agricultural projects, and establishing cooperative associations.
- (19) The Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation's (MOPIC) goal is to improve standards of living through participatory planning at local and national levels, for instance, through poverty reduction and sustainable growth initiatives.
- (20) The Vocational Training Corporation (VTC) aims to provide vocational training to all Jordanians regardless of their level of education, to improve efficiency in the labor market.
- (21) The Arab Women Organization (AWO) is an intergovernmental organization affiliated with the League of Arab States, and is dedicated to women's political and economic empowerment.
- (22) The Regional Centre on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development for the Near East (CARDNE) is an autonomous intergovernmental organization that works through a network of national institutions on issues related to agrarian reform and rural development.
- (23) The Microfund for Women (MFW) is a private non-profit company that is focused on providing financial services to low-income small business owners, particularly women.

***From “Liberal”  
to “Liberating”  
Empowerment:  
The Community  
Protection  
Approach as  
Best Practice  
to Address  
NGO-ization***

NICOLAS GIANNI, FRANCESCO  
MICHELE, CHIARA LOZZA

## ABSTRACT

Several studies highlight the phenomenon of NGO-ization, pointing to the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGO) guided by a “neoliberal mode of governance” and supplanting “indigenous forms of civil society,” primarily social movements (Dana 2013, 5). This phenomenon has attracted attention in relation to women’s activism, making the case that NGOs cannot promote “sustainable development and democratization” due to their lack of “locally grounded vision and [...] power basis” (Jad 2004, 40). This paper argues that the limitations of incorporating NGO modalities of work in rights activism can be better understood in relation to a hegemonic shift toward a more individualist and apolitical approach to empowerment. An alternative is outlined to address major shortcomings of the current development model, by recourse to an innovative approach to empowerment, the Community Protection Approach (CPA). To support such a position both theoretically and empirically, desk research is combined with individual semi-structured interviews conducted with nine women’s rights activists in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine.

## INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to conceptualize the observations collected throughout an action-research process carried out between 2017 and 2019 to develop the Community Protection Approach (CPA). The CPA is both an approach and a methodology to streamline actions within ongoing humanitarian and development projects in support of the affected population ([www.cpainitiative.org](http://www.cpainitiative.org), 2019). This research draws widely on field evidence of the implementation of the CPA between 2013 and 2019, and analyzes the exchange and feedback processes between affected communities and implementers in a variety of locations.

Drawing upon Sardenberg's distinction between "liberal" and "liberating" empowerment (Sardenberg 2008, 19), we argue that the continued NGO-ization of women's rights organizations has resulted in the perpetuation of what Sardenberg calls a "weak" meaning of empowerment, which focuses on capacities and access, while neglecting the root causes of disempowerment. What seems necessary is to bring power back into the discussion through a "strong" understanding of empowerment to subvert the unequal power relations underlying patriarchal domination (Batliwala 2007, 114). In this view, empowerment is accomplished when the ability of individuals to make decisions and act upon them has been brought to the fore, which is essential to the exercise of agency (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). Consequently, empowerment can be seen as both a process and an outcome.

The CPA has been designed to bring back the strong understanding of empowerment; through an analysis of unequal power relations, the CPA aims to ensure and support the agency of project beneficiaries – be it communities or individuals – to make safe and informed decisions. It examines generating forms of NGO-driven empowerment processes which, within "neoliberal forms of governance," reinforce and sustain virtuous "indigenous forms of civil society" (Dana 2013, 5).

This article faces several limitations. Primarily, grey literature on the subject of empowerment stemming from organizations on the ground is limited, and that which is available does not provide enough evidence on empowerment processes from a critical perspective. In and of itself, this limitation reflects how the NGO model of humanitarian and development aid rarely assesses empowerment in NGOs' day-to-day work, research, and processes, beyond "granting access to resources." Additionally, this article has been drafted with no dedicated research funding, and thus it is limited in its research and methodological design beyond the evidence collected through the CPA action-research between 2017 and 2019. Even when such direct evidence collected by means of CPA activities is not presented, CPA action-research represents a considerable array of grey literature and primary data.

## METHODOLOGY

The article draws on a structured mixed methods approach developed by Gruppo di Volontariato Civile (WeWorld-GVC) in 2013, and used as the foundation for the CPA integrated protection programming. The CPA way of working, together with its ongoing development, is based on a process of action-research involving opinion experts, frontline staff and local populations, and refugees in Palestine and Lebanon, while occasionally including other areas such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Tunisia, and Libya. This article includes interviews with participants from Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine. WeWorld-GVC has been applying the CPA since 2013, which recognizes the beneficiaries of specific humanitarian and development projects as not merely recipients of aid, but as integral components in the development and success of such projects: “involving those affected by the research in the design and implementation of the research – to encourage them to participate as collaborators in the research rather than being subjects of it” (Denscombe 2010, 126). To capture their voices, the CPA collects personal narratives (Bamberg 2011; Van Wessel 2018, 15-16, 23-30), among other qualitative and quantitative methods. These results are then triangulated with peer-reviewers’ and external experts’ opinions on the research design of the CPA. In reality, this process included approximately 55 consultation activities external to the organization, and some 25 internal consultations between 2014 and 2019.

For this article, an initial gender analysis was carried out on the CPA and its instruments, which provided us with some preliminary findings, which were then jointly reviewed by the authors of this article. We subsequently developed a number of research questions that were used to guide key informant interviews (KII) with selected frontline workers, who were identified by their extensive experience and joint relations with local populations in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). The research questions were also given to a WeWorld-GVC team, which has been working in parallel to devise a community empowerment manual. This team also participated in a final review of this paper. In addition, we conducted a thorough desk review and a series of semi-structured interviews with women’s rights activists and key WeWorld-GVC staff. These KIIs were focused on issues such as NGO-ization, gender, and insofar as the WeWorld-GVC staff is concerned, their familiarity with the CPA.

### The NGO-ization paradigm

We start with a brief discussion of NGO-ization. Several studies highlight the phenomenon of NGO-ization as the proliferation of non-government organizations (NGO) in the region guided by a “neoliberal mode of governance,” which has become the conventional model for social development. They argue that this modality of NGO-led development

and activism is supplanting “indigenous forms of civil society,” primarily social movements (Dana 2013, 5).

As Faranak Miraftab (1997, 365) points out in Mexico and Eileen Kuttab (2008, 100-105, 2009, 111-115, 2010, 248-251) in Palestine, the late 1980s and early 1990s brought about a significant change in the landscape of social activism globally, which is particularly pronounced in the context of the Middle East. After almost two decades of decentralized, mass-based organizations leading and promoting social change through grassroots activism, consciousness-raising, and active opposition to the existing structures of domination, the 1990s witnessed a proliferation of NGOs on the national and international scenes (Kuttab 2008, 99). Characterized by increased professionalization, larger operational capacity, greater specialization, and international recognition, NGOs quickly became the new *enfants prodige* of the international development system, with more and more support and funds being channeled through them by bilateral and multilateral agencies.

This is especially evident when it comes to women’s activism. Structured organizations were not extraneous to feminist movements: in Latin America, for example, they have long been coexisting with more informal women’s associations and movements, with which they shared the main objectives of popular education, political mobilization, and empowerment of poor and marginalized women (Alvarez 2010, 182). However, in the 1990s such organizations underwent a process of restructuring and professionalization, gaining unprecedented public prominence, and becoming the main interlocutors between national authorities and international development actors. Jad (2004, 38-40) describes the NGO-ization process of Arab women’s movements, and highlights how these movements have lost their effectiveness as a result of the required professionalization and restructuring to meet the organizational standards expected by international donors and agencies. What made these earlier movements accountable to their constituencies was their broad social base and membership (Jad 2004, 38). Their history of being deeply embedded in the communities they represented stands in sharp contrast to the reality of the transformed landscape of civil society today, where women’s rights NGOs are smaller in size and keen on international recognition; whose employees have little say or are unaware of important decision-making processes reserved for upper management; and whose work is project-based, responding to the needs of “target groups” often identified through criteria based on the global agenda for women’s rights (Jad 2004, 39). Such developments are not unique to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as women’s movements and social movements in general appear to be set for a marked decline, with their capacity to mobilize and represent the masses being significantly eroded.

Most of the literature concerned with this issue agrees that NGO-ization represents the outcome of the specific political culture stemming from the neoliberal economic regime

(Alvarez 2010; Awashra & Awashreh 2012; Azzam 2014; Batliwala 2007; Dana 2013; Jad 2004; Kamat 2003, 2004; Kuttab 2008, 2009, 2010; Mirafteb 1997; and Sardenberg 2016). Countering the narrative that perceives NGOs and similar organizations to be sincere expressions of international civil society and its ethical imperatives of solidarity, humanity, and inclusion, this line of thought argues that the role of NGOs is “not an innocent one, but one that foretells a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capitalist interests” (Kuttab 2004, 156). More specifically, NGOs embody a restructuring of public and collective good along neoliberal, individualistic lines. NGOs, critics argue, are unable to foster participatory development and promote sustainable development and democratization due to their lack of locally-grounded vision, legitimacy, and power base (Jad 2004, 38). Following this line of criticism, the next two sections will address the main weaknesses of the NGO model, thus exposing the key issues that any alternative model has to address in order to provide a relevant response to today’s lingering development dilemma.

### ***Dependence on international funding and agenda***

One of the main issues highlighted by international scholarship on NGO-ization is organizations’ reliance on international funding. As mentioned earlier, the 1990s represented a milestone in terms of international support to NGOs: international donors jumped with both feet into the “development market,” investing in NGOs as the “vehicle of choice” (Kuttab 2004, 160). Neoliberal political culture inspired a “less self-evidently progressive set of gender-focused policies, centered on incorporating the poorest of poor women into the market and promoting ‘self-help,’” for which feminist NGOs were designed to be the standard-bearers, in charge of administering the planned self-help, social services, and training programs (Alvarez 2010, 182).

About thirty years later, NGOs appear to be victims of the generalized curse of foreign aid-dependency. With very few exceptions, NGOs have come to depend on foreign aid to implement their programs. This situation opens the door to a heightened vulnerability of NGOs to any changes in the financial support they receive from external agents. As one interviewee pointed out:

*"Today, the main issue [for Palestinian NGOs] is the total dependence on the donors and the consequently weak position at the negotiating table. Flexibility can take you to a place where you are completely donor-driven [...]. For example, you can respond to a call for proposals in two ways. You either put what you think is best for the Palestinian society, ignoring the directions of the donor; or you follow these directions religiously – you can either respond to the needs of society or get the funding." (Personal communication, 2019)*

What is critical here is that NGOs’ funding comes with conditions and instructions.

Typically, it provides guidelines on the funder's priorities (e.g. women's economic empowerment) that the organization needs to comply with in order to be eligible for the funds. This inevitably raises concerns about the autonomy of NGOs. Is it possible, under these conditions, to consider NGOs as primarily guided by the needs and priorities of their social base and, in particular, of the most marginal populations they are expected to serve?

Reviewing the different programs of women's NGOs in South America, South Africa, and the Arab region, Kuttab (2008, 109) highlights the significant degree of similarity between these NGOs' agendas, all the more astonishing if one takes into account the considerably different social and political contexts in which such programs are implemented. UN agencies' women's programs seem to have developed an orthodox feminist discourse, in the form of a standardized agenda that has been embraced by women's rights organizations all over the world as a prerequisite for accessing much-needed funds. As Kuttab notes:

*"Women's rights as human rights became the slogan of UN organizations, where a consensus platform has been created that sticks only to the lowest common denominator in that it does not relate to any local context and, in this case, the needs of Palestinian women under colonial occupation." (2018, 109)*

Consequently, NGOs have in most cases severed their ties to their constituencies, reformulating their agendas in line with the dominant global discourse on women's rights, resulting in a disconnect with, and a lack of responsiveness to, women's strategic needs. This entails very practical consequences, as organizations inherit a set of pre-defined actions and implement them as if the demands of the people they are serving are already known – as if these demands could not be anything other than the needs listed in the global agenda, from literacy to birth control and access to microcredit. For their part, the proactive role of the intended beneficiaries within organizations is diminished; instead, they become “target groups” whose limited participation is relegated to identifying specific needs to be prioritized for the (short) duration of the project. Against this background, something seems to be missing – namely, legitimacy.

### ***Lack of legitimacy***

As a relational concept, legitimacy bears no meaning outside of the relationship between the specific actors or groups against which it is “measured.” Nothing is legitimate in absolute terms, or in a vacuum: legitimacy is negotiated, awarded, and denied – in all cases, it requires a relation and a context, as well as a set of values or expectations that circumscribe it (Brechenmacher & Carothers 2018, 34).

In the case of civil society, the discourse of legitimacy has been framed in several ways by different actors, all of which represent specific sets of interests. Governments have questioned the legitimacy of organizations as a part of their attempt to shrink the space for civil society, pushing a popular conspiracy theory that frames NGOs as agents furthering a foreign agenda against national interests and security. For their part, international agencies have bestowed or denied legitimacy to different organizations, for example, awarding certain NGOs with funds and a ticket to the international development arena. It thus seems apparent that defining and evaluating the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by NGOs is not free from one's own standpoint, values, and political views. For the purpose of this article, the legitimacy of NGOs will be considered in relation to three main elements: who these organizations are (their identity as societal actors and who they are accountable to); what they do (the relevance of the issues they address and the impact they achieve); and how they conceptualize the subject on behalf of which their actions for social change are taken.

### ***1. Legitimacy***

Legitimacy for civil society organizations stems from their identity as societal actors and groups that are constituted and guided by the people whose interests they seek to represent (Brechenmacher & Carothers 2018, 35). As the slogan “nothing about us without us,” adopted by proponents of disability rights activism in the U.S., hints: inclusion and participation represent a strong source of legitimacy for any organization. Such participation takes the form of a constant, honest dialogue with the communities or populations the organization aims to represent, as well as an intimate relationship of mutual trust continuously renegotiated.

Related to this is the issue of accountability. If we treat organizations as living, relational beings, we cannot explore their identity without taking into consideration who they answer to, or who they act on behalf of. If organizations are legitimate according to the definition above, meaning they embody the voice of the communities or groups they seek to represent, then, by default, that very same community should represent the most relevant focus of those organizations. Translating this into development jargon, we could say that downward accountability is another crucial element of legitimacy for local organizations.

How is legitimacy compromised? Several scholars argue that NGOs' adoption of the diluted, standardized gender discourse stemming from the international agenda and frameworks, often irrelevant to the local context and its authentic culture, has alienated them from the needs and aspirations of their intended beneficiaries.

*"The people, not the donors, constitute the only source for legitimacy and accountability for the women's movement, as well as for other social movements. These organizations are faced with a skeptical public who, at this stage, are questioning their transparency, maturity, seriousness and degree of responsibility." (Kuttab 2008, 111)*

It seems, therefore, that unless NGOs are able to turn their attention back where it belongs, with the people they seek to represent and redefining their own priorities and vision according to those they represent, they will hardly manage to reverse the current trend of diminishing legitimacy and credibility.

In 2012, Raed Awashra and Majida Awashreh conducted a study on Palestinian NGO governance in the West Bank, with a focus on accountability. They aimed to investigate who Palestinian NGOs are primarily accountable to – donors or the communities they work with. To measure this, they used information as a key variable: low levels of information sharing would highlight limited accountability, while significant amounts of information sharing would hint to strong accountability practices. In particular, public access to information, according to the authors, is a prerequisite for public accountability and participation, the latter made easier “when information is made available [...] in a timely manner” (Awashra & Awashreh 2012, 68).

The findings of Awashra and Awashreh’s (2012) study point to the fact that Palestinian NGOs are more accountable to donors than to the communities they are meant to represent:

*"Accountability to donors is practiced through various tools requiring the dedication of time and effort by [Palestinian NGO] executives and personnel for routine paperwork (e.g. authorization requests, updates, progress reports, audits, payment requests, accounting papers, beneficiary lists, bill of quantities, and success stories to name but a few). This sounds like huge amounts of information are provided to donors." (68)*

Conversely:

*"NGOs produce and share very little information with the public, while their efforts for greater participatory practices are tokenism at best. For example, Palestinian urban-based NGOs run websites, but limit these to basic standard information about NGOs' missions, goals, projects – and only a handful provide information on the organizations' structure." (68)*

The linkage between the two dilemmas, namely the “international agenda vs constituency’s priorities,” and the “upwards vs downwards accountability” is manifest in the results of the study, in which the authors conclude that the majority of respondents stressed “two interrelated issues: NGOs function with a donor-driven agenda, and that their accountabilities are directed upwards towards their financiers” (Awashra & Awashreh 2012, 70).

## ***2. Agenda and impact***

Organizations also derive their legitimacy from the issues they work on, as well as the extent to which their work has an impact on the lives of their beneficiaries (Breckenmacher & Carothers 2018, 35). Fostering a true participatory approach entails developing an in-depth knowledge of the practical and strategic needs of the organization's membership base, its priorities and wishes, its attitudes, and its norms. Such knowledge should inform an organizational strategy that responds to criteria of local relevance, directly addressing the needs of the population and reflecting their priorities. More than that, local relevance entails that such needs and priorities are not considered in isolation from the whole system of norms and practices in which they are embedded. In other words, local relevance implies that any and all organizational action needs to be political in the broadest sense. Being political does not necessarily refer to the formal or informal structures of public governance – rather, it “involves intimately the mundane practices of everyday life,” which highlights the ways that everyday practices represent the visible manifestation of the underlying dynamics of power and influence, and the patterns of exclusion and privilege they originate (Bayat 2010, 16).

The question of impact, in turn, is related to the extent to which organizational agendas are an expression of a locally-grounded political vision and understanding. Organizational programming or actions based on a time-bound focus on the practical needs of a narrowly-defined target group seem unlikely to hold the potential for meaningful, long-term impact, understood as a significant and sustainable change in one or more dimensions of human life. On the other hand, addressing a group or a community's strategic needs with the objective to foster meaningful impact cannot prescind from an honest engagement with the structures of power that create such needs.

If we want to examine how NGOs fare in relation to agenda and impact, we need to look at how they conceptualize and address issues of inequality, poverty, and violence. Specifically, we need to identify whether NGOs are addressing these problems through an analysis of power and social relations, or by means of a “functionalist problem-solving approach” that targets the needs of atomized individuals (Kamat 2003, 90).

## ***3. Depoliticization of gender***

Similar considerations can be made with specific reference to the domain of women's rights NGOs. Kuttab has frequently stressed that over the past three decades, NGOs have systematically applied a paradigm based on liberal feminism, which “conceives women as the sole agents of their destiny and considers gender as an individual rather than a relational concept” (2008, 112). This tendency has two main implications in

relation to the agenda and priorities of civil society organizations and NGOs. First, any individualistic understanding of gender brings with it a necessary underestimation of the wider political, social, and economic context within which gender issues and women's social rights are embedded. Organizations applying this paradigm tend to neglect the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of factors such as the control of (physical and intangible) resources; the resultant social expectations of gender roles in the productive and reproductive sphere; the intersecting factors determining specific patterns of discrimination such as ability, race, and class; the role that institutions play in perpetuating certain forms of discrimination; and so forth. While understanding and addressing such issues is the very foundation of any action aiming to promote social change, this appears to be sidelined by organizations that focus on problems of access to resources and services as an issue that can be separated from the wider environment.

Second, and relatedly, analyzing gender as the sum of the needs of atomized women effectively removes gender from the public realm, constructing it as a separate, private issue. This has the effect of depoliticizing it, and removing it from the broader political context and discourse that marks the difference between a standardized global agenda for women's rights, and one that is relevant to the local context. This creates two specific outcomes: on the one hand, women's programs are decoupled from broader social, political, and economic programs, thus marginalizing other overlapping issues, and creating a standalone "women's sector." On the other, this "sector" is internally fragmented into specialized and partial sub-agendas dealing with specific "women's issues" according to different organizations' missions and "expertise." This has the effect of "compartmentaliz[ing] women's struggle and experience, limiting the ability of organizations to see the big picture [and preventing] a comprehensive understanding of women's issues, separating practical and strategic gender needs from one another" (Kuttab, 2008, 111).

Consequently, the impact of initiatives launched by women's NGOs tends to be limited, as their actions and programs do not (nor do they truly aim to) address and transform gendered power relations. These organizations are therefore unable to bring about significant and lasting developments in the daily lives of a substantial number of women. Mainly focusing on providing social and economic services to individuals, NGOs seem to have missed the momentum to promote some form of transformative development that goes beyond narrowly-defined target groups and issues.

This section provided a brief overview of some of the main arguments concerning the NGO-ization paradigm, with a primary focus on the accountability and legitimacy of NGOs; their decoupling from the constituencies they supposedly represent; and the standardization of organizational programming that fails to address the highly

contextualized challenges that women experience worldwide. This literature review highlighted some of the common effects of NGO-ization, including the adoption of a standardized global agenda, increased professionalization and specialization, and the broad depoliticization of human rights and gender issues. Such findings were further substantiated by the respondents to our study, who agreed that NGOs currently find themselves in a position of almost complete dependence upon external sources of funding, and are therefore prone to adopt an exogenous agenda. This entails significant consequences in terms of participation and impact, and undermines the credibility and legitimacy of NGOs in the eyes of the populations they seek to serve:

*"Nobody likes to be donor-driven. We realize that, and we are not happy. But as NGOs, we need to survive; then we need resources; then we need to be flexible [...]. That's why NGOs now are in the worst situation ever. They are perceived badly by the society [that] would accuse NGOs of just taking the money and not serving the beneficiaries the way they expect them to." (Personal communication, 2019).*

The NGO-ization paradigm was born and developed to analyze the features of NGOs in opposition to “indigenous forms of civil society,” notably social movements (Dana 2013, 5-6). Arguably, the NGO-ization paradigm rests on a dichotomy that understands NGOs and social movements as essentially distinct entities. Because dichotomies are conceptualized by a series of antonymic features – illegitimate versus legitimate, elitist versus inclusive, professionalized versus grassroots, and so forth. This has led many scholars to address NGOs as a “corruption” of an original model – the social movement – which is often praised in relation to the disadvantages of adopting an NGO model.

Our paper aims to depart from such a clear-cut distinction, and to go beyond vague calls to return to “idealized forms of mobilized grassroots movements” (Azzam 2014). It would be easy to reiterate the need for greater inclusion of bottom-up social movements into the programmatic work of international development NGOs, but that would neglect the manner by which such movements are co-opted into the larger fold of decontextualized, global agendas for women’s rights, as we have seen with examples from Palestine and Latin America. Instead, we argue that the shortcomings affecting women’s rights activism can be better understood in relation to a systemic shift towards a more individualist and apolitical approach to empowerment, which finds expression in the NGO-ization process, but is not intrinsic to it.

If it is in the context of everyday life that hegemonic relations are consolidated, then that is also where such norms must be challenged. Civil society, in particular, is the primary locus where “the seeds of a new conception of the world are to be found. A narrative of reality with the power to challenge the existing hegemony” (Kabeer 1999, 66). Civil society is thus the ultimate site of empowerment. However, what are the forms that

such a process of empowerment takes in practice, and how is it possible to support it without falling back into the arrogance of “gifting” empowerment to a target group of beneficiaries?

## EMPOWERMENT

Perhaps, the question we should ask at this point is not whether NGOs differ from social movements (they do), or whether they represent the operationalization of a development discourse that is flawed by neoliberal assumptions that limit their impact, legitimacy, and ethical foundation (they do). Nor should we focus too much on proving that social movements themselves do not live up to their idealized image. Perhaps what we should reflect upon is how more than thirty years of neoliberal outlook have influenced our understanding of what empowerment stands for – in effect, launching a process of conscientization about our own assumptions and the limits that we all impose on our imagination as a result of the hegemonic neoliberal system dominating development practice and beyond. If the current development model is not working, if NGOs have walked away from their potential to promote democracy and social movements seem to have lost their capacity for social change in the face of a neoliberal world, perhaps it is time for all of us to start reflecting about what is the point of all this, and where we want to be headed.

### *Liberal empowerment*

Sardenberg (2008, 25) argues that mainstream development agencies and organizations have contributed to developing and perpetuating a notion of empowerment that is an extension of the social and political vision underpinning the neoliberal economy – what she calls a “liberal empowerment approach,” as opposed to a “liberating” kind of empowerment. This approach puts the focus on individuals and resources:

*"Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives [...]. Poor women and men need a range of assets and capabilities to increase their wellbeing and security, as well as their self-confidence, so they can negotiate with those more powerful." (World Bank 2002, 2)*

As this example clearly shows, the focus of this type of empowerment is on individual development and growth based on a notion of rational social actors guided by individual interests. In this sense, empowerment is circumscribed to certain material gains, such as assets, skills, and resources, but also self-awareness and control, stemming from the individual and reflected in the “clout” they gain in terms of influence and negotiating power. Individuals in a neoliberal world are actors who have the potential to provide for their livelihood needs, to make their voices heard, and to demand, obtain, and

own their own assets and resources. Thus, the objective of development is to empower beneficiaries to be proper subjects under neoliberalism. “The World Bank helps those who help themselves,” you might say.

Empowerment, therefore, is interpreted as “enabling” individuals, in other words, providing access to resources and opportunities to help them help themselves. The focus is therefore on individual situations, skills, and choices, coupled with a liberal emphasis on individual rights and responsibility (Miraftab 1997, 373). Conceptualizing empowerment in this way, however, shifts the focus away from the fact that it is “awarded” to someone by means of increased access. This obscures the types of negotiation, self-reflection, and group organizing that underlie such processes (Sardenberg 2008, 23-24). By logical consequence, the concept of participation undergoes a similar reconstruction; increased participation in decision-making; and an increase in the number of choices available to individuals, assuming that “gaining access to resources – or even achieving the economic or legal rights and equalities that might facilitate such access – will necessarily translate into greater capacity to act” (Rowlands 1995, 88). Thus, the means by which empowerment is identified, measured, and valued takes on a quantitative and technical dimension (e.g. quotas) while neglecting processes that draw upon power through collective reflection and exchange (Sardenberg, 2008, 22).

Focusing the attention on the means through which individuals gain access to resources and decision-making processes risks reinforcing unjust structures and situations. This not only delinks them from the social and political environment in which they are embedded, weakening the horizontal linkages of solidarity and social mobilization, but it also takes the social and political causes of poverty, inequality, and violence out of the picture. In this way, “the individual is posited as both the problem and the solution to poverty,” which leaves the unjust structures and uneven relations of power untouched and unquestioned (Kamat 2003, 91). The result is the restriction of the public space to an arena where competing private interests and everyday practices intersect and negotiate, with no understanding of the uneven relations of power operating below the surface (Kamat 2004, 165-166). As Sardenberg (2008) notes:

*"This notion of "liberal" empowerment actually fosters "empowerment without power" in that it gives no space for changes in the existing power relations, nor in the structures of domination that are responsible for exclusion, poverty and disempowerment in the first place. This results in diluted empowerment (or "decaf" empowerment), as in the World Bank approach, which focuses on access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and local organizational capacity, but does not discuss why some groups are excluded and do not have access to information, thus ignoring the structures of power that underscore the observed situation of exclusion and "disempowerment" in the first place." (22)*

## ***Liberating empowerment***

Sardenberg and other feminist scholars identify a second definition of empowerment that carries a radically different meaning – one of political change and transformation. While the “liberal” understanding of empowerment derives its main elements from neoliberalism, specifically its emphasis on ontological individualism and the privatization of the public space, this second meaning of empowerment – known as “liberating” empowerment – draws from theories of social constructivism and Gramscian hegemony, which articulate a radically different discourse of power and transformation. In particular, it gives prominence to the idea that power is embedded in all relations, institutions, and systems of knowledge, and is reproduced through social and cultural norms that “enable and constrain thinking, action, and behavior” (Pettit 2012, 3). Empowerment, according to this line of thought, is about transforming the power relations between groups and individuals in the political, social, and economic domain (Batliwala 2007, 115). In this sense, power includes but goes beyond the structures of formal domination, and encompasses the discourses, norms, and practices that are internalized by both the oppressors and the oppressed through the daily processes of socialization, based on the acceptance and reproduction of a “natural” inequality in roles, including between men and women. Referring to the oppressed as subalterns, a term first coined by Gramsci to encapsulate those social groups oppressed and/or forced to the margins of society, Crehan (2016) describes the hegemonic relation between the oppressors and the oppressed:

*"Subalterns inhabit a world in which the major conceptual structures available to them are themselves inextricably bound up with the hegemonic narratives of the dominant classes. This is part of what defines the condition of subalternity. [...] Hegemony does not require that those who are ruled, the subalterns, see their subjugation as justified, only that they see it as a fixed and unchangeable reality it would be futile to oppose. Only to the extent that we accept, whatever our actual social and economic location, the hegemonic narrative portraying the world as seen from the vantage point of those who hold power we might say that we inhabit a common, shared world. (52-60)*

This process entails a challenge to the ideologies and social constructions justifying inequality – in other words, “liberating” empowerment challenges hegemonic discourses and power structures. It pushes toward a revolution in the patterns of access and control over physical and intangible resources, and for a transformation in the social institutions that express and underlie the existing power structures (Batliwala 2007, 115).

Such an understanding of empowerment differs from “liberal empowerment” in several ways. First and foremost, it entails a holistic approach to human experience. It does not fragment and compartmentalize issues; rather, it highlights their interconnectedness and the interaction of different dimensions in determining the patterns of social injustice. Thus, “women’s issues” do not exist in a vacuum – gender is considered in relation

to other personal and environmental elements that constitutively create exclusion or privilege, such as ability, class, political orientation, and race. Furthermore, such a prism of intersecting characteristics is viewed against the background of a specific context. In this sense, empowerment cannot be limited to the improvement of the specific conditions of a number of individual women; it requires a collective struggle for societal transformation triggering longer-term change within structures of oppression, including patriarchy (Sardenberg 2008, 24). Such collective struggle can be facilitated or supported by external agents, but cannot be bestowed upon beneficiaries. Rather, it is both the process of self-determination by which people can subvert the structures of oppression and an end in itself, being characterized by accrued autonomy, awareness, and agency.

We argue, in line with Paulo Freire's (1987) scholarship, that empowerment relies upon developing a critical consciousness through which the subaltern groups and individuals break the cycle of internalization of the dominant worldview and the assumptions it conveys about social roles and relations. Through conscientization, the socially dispossessed question the grounds of the status quo and their own powerlessness, rejecting the myths and discourses that make them "objects," rather than "subjects," of power and development. Such a process of self-awareness differs radically from the concept of "consciousness raising," a now-popular term within the development industry. Indeed, it detaches itself from the transmission of chosen knowledge in favor of a praxis of active and continuous critique – an open process of construction of the capacity to question assumptions, reflect upon one's own situation, and use this awareness to act collectively.

This understanding of empowerment brings power back into the equation. Nevertheless, power is a fluid concept, and can be conceptualized in several different ways. Thus, it is important to ask: which interpretation of power is best suited to "liberating" empowerment as outlined above?

In agreement with Naila Kabeer (1999), we argue that power is best understood as the ability to make choices. Empowerment, therefore, refers to the process by which "those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (435). Such a process of empowerment cannot be restricted solely to the granting of a voice or representation in existing political and economic decision-making structures, nor to access to resources. Rather, this is a long-term, disruptive process, requiring the "oppressed" to first recognize the ideology legitimizing their oppression, and then to understand the mechanisms that perpetuate this status quo, including their own participation within this oppressive system. This, in turn, calls for a "stretched" meaning of agency that extends beyond the basic definition, which implies the ability to make one's own choices and to participate in decision-making, to encompass more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (438). Agency, according to this definition,

refers to both a person's capacity to make choices and their ability to identify, question, and address the norms and preconditions limiting the spectrum of choices that they perceive as viable and legitimate. As Rowland (1995) notes:

*"McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as: The process by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community. [...] Through all these definitions runs the theme of understanding: if you understand your situation, you are more likely to act to do something about it." (88)*

Our suggestion, then, is to bring power back into the discussion, particularly through a "strong" understanding of empowerment that encompasses the subalterns' ability to question and act upon the unequal power relations underlying domination (Sardenberg 2008, 23). Drawing upon the considerations outlined above, we argue that a concept and practice of alternative development can be built through a new emphasis on a process of collective reflection and conscientization. As Batliwala (2007) and Kuttab (2008) highlight in the Indian and Palestinian contexts, respectively, there are successful examples of new spaces created for women and communities to "collectivize around shared experiences of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, critically analyze the structures and ideologies that sustained and reinforced their oppression, and raise consciousness of their own sense of subordination" (Batliwala 2007, 561). Such reflections can lead oppressed individuals to articulate their own practical and strategic needs, strategize solutions, and recognize their ability to organize themselves to change the structures and norms that subjugate them. As one interviewee noted:

*"It is the concept of hegemony – to build a power system you need to win people's minds. Many people think this way, without there being a logical framework behind it, but the more you ask them why, and question them, the less they know how to answer. When you want to empower a community, it's not enough for us to be familiar with the underlying causes of oppression; it's even more important for the members of this community to understand why they think the way they think. This is something different, because we usually distinguish between analysis and raising awareness. But in this process, you combine the two approaches and initiate a process of reflection. It's important to keep asking ourselves why, and to get to understand how society has made us reach this point." (Personal communication, 2019)*

The idea is quite simple: if people have space for discussion, they will start exchanging ideas and reflecting upon their shared experience of oppression. However, this contradicts several basic features of the current aid system, from the short-term project time-frame to the focus on targeted actions for specific groups, which ultimately precludes the possibility to inaugurate a wider-ranging process of reflection and identity (de)construction. It seems necessary, however, to encourage this kind of discussion as a way to rethink dominant

practices of development. We already see global attempts to encourage the transferral of decision-making power from the international aid and development sector to their local counterparts, notably within the commitments made as part of the Grand Bargain during the World Humanitarian Summit (IASC 2016, 10). Yet, these grandiose claims have not translated into practice (Metcalf-Hough 2019, 58-60). Moreover, international agencies and NGOs tend to seek organizations or movements that reflect their particular set of priorities for development – priorities that perpetuate the dominant, neoliberal ontologies that strive for individualized and “liberal” empowerment. Though arguably well-intentioned, increased strides for greater localization may inadvertently speed up NGO-ization processes and co-opt women’s movements, replicating patterns of hegemonic relations instead.

## THE COMMUNITY PROTECTION APPROACH

In this concluding section, we will analyze how innovative approaches to development and aid – specifically, the Community Protection Approach (CPA) – can move this discussion forward, especially as it embodies a “strong” understanding of empowerment. Far from being a complete response to the shortcomings of the NGO model, the CPA experience can contribute to a necessary discussion about development and empowerment.

The Community Protection Approach ([CPA] [www.cpainitiative.org](http://www.cpainitiative.org)) is a community<sup>1</sup> engagement and empowerment framework that enables more effective and lasting strategies to reduce aid dependence by placing self-reliance of the affected population at its core. It provides operational tools to facilitate complementarity, coordination, and coherence of the response and assistance provided by national and international actors. The CPA is designed to ensure that people in need can pursue rights-based analysis and humanitarian principles for themselves, while setting the basis for a transitional strategy to reduce the presence of international NGOs and actors in favor of localized strategies to address the coercive structures impacting the lives of community members.

The principle guiding the CPA is that communities are not monolithic entities with homogeneous needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities, exposed to identical protection threats. Rather, communities are composed of individuals who live a unique experience, which shapes their interaction with other individuals and groups. Personal and social characteristics such as gender, age, race, class, ability, gender identity, and sexual

---

1 The definition of community, as defined by the CPA, represents a group of people that may be exposed to similar physical, psychological, and/or social impacts from multiple coercive factors and/or share the same resources, often, but not exclusively, related by place.

orientation intersect and overlap with one another, affecting a person's identity. Such a process is not neutral, as it is constrained by extant forms of social stratification and systems of power that determine patterns of exclusion and privilege.

The CPA framework reflects one simple idea: everyday problems are rooted in the broader socioeconomic and political context. The roots of different problems may intertwine, as one single underlying cause can be the origin of seemingly unrelated phenomena, as well as intersect with other personal and environmental factors, to produce distinct results for different individuals and groups. In light of this complexity, investigating the elements that lay beyond the surface of what is immediately visible entails a critical examination of a group's assumptions about a given situation or problem.

While the idea behind the CPA is that the implementing organization or NGO acts primarily as a facilitator of this reflective process, it nonetheless aims to provide structure to this process, to avoid any reiterations of existing lines of inequality. The objective of the CPA is to provide an encompassing methodological approach for local and international actors to be able to respond to administrative and procedural requests of donors, while simultaneously enabling a nurturing environment that can empower local communities. The CPA is, therefore, complementary to projects and program cycles in each given context. The CPA, furthermore, is designed to evolve and be modified according to the results obtained. The CPA is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the conditions of each context, with the understanding that the nature of each actor and situation differs and is complex. It therefore requires a method that reinforces the capacities of everyone involved in the process, and caters to the specific conditions faced by the community the CPA seeks to support.

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation model, the foundational theoretical framework of the CPA, identifies the level of engagement the community has, in this instance with either international actors or the duty-bearers from which they seek their protection rights, revealing the relations of power between both groups. The form of a ladder makes clear the various stages of engagement, with all the "steps" divided into three categories: nonparticipation; tokenism; and citizen control. After initial contact, the establishment of trust, and regular communication, during which discussions about the communities' rights, responsibilities, and options are held, the process of community empowerment through active participation begins with informing and consulting with community members. This one-sided, information-sharing stage shifts to a more active involvement from both parties as more public meetings and focus group discussions are held; multi-sector questionnaires are answered; contextualization is established through Narrated Community Perspectives (NCP) field sessions that ensure inclusive representation

of Age Gender and Diversity (AGD) groups; and an individual protection approach<sup>2</sup> is initiated when a person's immediate protection needs have not been met.

First developed for application in the Palestinian context and later improved upon and piloted in other countries, the CPA analysis addresses the assumption that communities and affected populations are not necessarily aware of the causes underlying the problems they face in their everyday life – nor are the organizations that seek to address these problems. Among the factors explaining this potential lack of awareness, the concept of hegemony is key. As one interviewee highlights:

*"Occupation is the main cause behind disempowerment. However, when you ask people about their problems, you have to ask them a lot of "why's" to get a grasp of the real problems and of how complicated the situation is. Occupation is more than its tangible effects; it is the mindset it perpetuates, as well as the psychological effects that result in every kind of disempowerment you can think of. [...] In Palestine, what the occupation has been so successful in doing is taking away the people's understanding of what they want or what is best for them [...]. They don't have the privilege to find out for themselves the kinds of rights they are entitled to as human beings, and NGOs do not touch on this." (Personal communication, 2019)*

Against this background, the CPA framework has proven the importance of triggering and facilitating a dialogic reflection, at the community level, about the main problems identified and their causes, consequences, and the coping strategies adopted to deal with them. This approach distances itself from mainstream NGO praxis in two ways. First, it moves away from the idea of "consciousness-raising" with a predefined result in mind – rather than aiming at "sensitizing" a specific population or group regarding a given problem, the CPA adopts a probing methodology that facilitates critical reflection, helping this group to question the factors underlying disempowerment, as well as their own assumptions and acceptance of such factors. Second, this process is not aimed at collecting information and performing an analysis; instead, it aims to trigger a process that builds the knowledge and awareness of the community, not only in relation to their problems, but in relation to their lives, the meanings they attribute to it, and their ways of thinking. This results in a strategic partnership between the community and the organizations working with it, with the aim of developing a shared understanding of the internal and external factors that threaten the overall community and its different groups and members.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Individual Protection Approach (IPA) is a mechanism to identify and assess people whose immediate physiological, dignity and safety needs are not met; it supports, through guidance or mediation, the linking of right-holders to an appropriate service provider through a referral system.

Nevertheless, this process can only make sense if the different parties involved in it are able to develop an intimate, evolving relationship that makes it possible to surpass the logic of “one-off focus groups” in favor of an open and continuous dialogue based on mutual trust. What matters, in this sense, is the possibility of constantly expanding and elaborating upon this dialogue, enriching the reflection and the knowledge developed by both the organization and the community.

With this in mind, the CPA mainstreams the AGD approach (UNHCR 2004) with the aim of ensuring that all individuals in affected communities are able to fully participate in the decisions that affect their lives. In this sense, the CPA strives to ensure that the process of consultation and reflection outlined above does not reproduce patterns of exclusion, and to make sure it is not limited to engaging only “target vulnerable groups.” Rather, it aims to trigger a process wherein all different voices are heard, both separately – to ensure that underlying power and social dynamics, including gender relations, do not prevent any group from freely expressing and discussing their priorities – and together, to stimulate the collective questioning of assumptions. In conclusion, the CPA facilitates a process of conscientization that has the potential to integrate “women’s issues” within the reflection of the community, thus making them a part of the construction of a comprehensive path of self-awareness.

The culmination of this collaborative analysis, for example, includes Protection Response Plans (PRPs), which are locally-developed strategies that do not only reflect the activities of a single NGO or actor, but outline a set of actions to address the coercive structures affecting the safety and dignity of the community itself. By nature, each strategy differs and does not pre-identify the set of intervening actors, but rather, combines all the elements for the purposeful engagement of those bearing the duty to ensure rights, and those with an influential role within the power, societal, and cultural systems affecting the community in question. This helps to address the coercive environment in a specific community, drawing upon the application of the Protection Egg model, which divides the sequencing of activities along a spectrum that determines their urgency and purpose, in which humanitarian and development activities are planned accordingly (ICRC 2001). The design and application of PRPs are an exception to the norm when compared to standard participatory planning, in that they help guide the continuous process of self-reflection of the program and its operationalization. Within the CPA’s internal logic, these PRPs become an evidence-based instrument that deepens the understanding of the root causes that violate a community’s rights, allowing for different AGD groups to tackle threats, address vulnerabilities, and build upon capacities. They do not only act as a list of activities to be implemented; they also identify the actions required to counteract specific hegemonic relations that oppress the agency of the community.

PRPs challenge the standard “project-cycle,” “sector-based” method of working for NGOs, since they require a “facilitator mindset,” working specifically towards the factors that prevent a community from demanding accountability from those responsible for their safety and dignity. This is oftentimes overlooked or sacrificed in order to prioritize life-saving activities or to apply a conservative approach to Do No Harm in contexts where power relations between citizens and the state (or other actors holding specific duties) are sensitive and not linear. While the need to be cautious and uphold standard humanitarian principles remains tantamount to any operation, it should not be at the expense of “overlooking” a range of doable actions that NGOs should adhere to. If a state, for example, grants limited access for international actors to assist affected populations in crisis, yet remains the main perpetrator for violations committed against such communities, then NGOs must seek not only to provide immediate assistance, but also to meaningfully transform these oppressive relations. To give another example, in the context of a crisis oversaturated with many different international actors, an NGO must critically examine its own added value in assisting communities, and whether its presence further complicates an effective and efficient response.

Regarding the CPA, these and other actions are not mutually exclusive to its application, and draw upon two key lessons. The first is the objective and transparent recognition that a continuous NGO presence stems from a dominant position and precludes the standard identification of an effective exit strategy. NGOs may intend to alleviate suffering or the oppression of communities, but their continued presence may inadvertently reinforce cycles of aid dependency without tackling the root causes of oppression and inequality. With the aim to render their role in assistance redundant, NGOs can accelerate processes that support communities to break from oppressive, hegemonic conditions. This point was reiterated by an interviewee who was commenting on the importance of an exit strategy:

*"[I]f you talk about empowerment, there is a fine line between being present and making the community understand that we will leave, because the purpose of us [NGOs] being here is that at some point, people will not need us to be around anymore [...]. Therefore, we need to have an exit strategy, and to have people aware of it – but for it to be sustainable, we need to have a good analysis in the first place. You can't have tangible positive change and a sustainable exit strategy if you just build a road and then leave. With communities that have been so systematically, institutionally broken for so long, there needs to be a redefining of what communities are to themselves in the first place." (Personal communication, 2019)*

The second is the importance of assuming that an NGO does not lose anything if another actor or even another, better-placed NGO replaces it. The CPA reminds organizations of their responsibilities towards the most vulnerable; if that means that an organization should redirect its efforts elsewhere to allow for better-equipped actors to intervene in its place, then this should be done and not conceptualized as a “loss.” Project activities

can be continued or not, but the process of maintaining an ongoing collective self-reflection with a community, with the aim to challenge the factors causing vulnerabilities and oppressions, should be part of the social contract among NGOs, international organizations, and community actors, and must be maintained independently from project cycles.

Challenging such factors requires the attainment of agency, returning to Kabeer's (1999) definition, for a community to actively dismantle and reconstruct oppressive limitations into new and imagined social relations that they themselves have a hand in shaping. To achieve this type of holistic agency, there must be a continued effort to engage in analytical self-reflection with the population in question, and to be able to provide timely analyses and outcomes that can be used to comply with the relevant technical and programmatic standards adhered to by international actors.

## CONCLUSION

Applying principles of emancipatory research to recognize and deconstruct power relations, the CPA foregrounds not only the participation of beneficiaries, but also the direct management of research activities by community members. Participation, through an emancipatory approach, enables people to increase the possibilities for strategies that affect their livelihoods, and their capabilities to enact them. Our proposal is based on the necessity to contextualize and reflect on qualitative information and data collected with AGD groups, among other project and aid beneficiaries, specifically the self-reflections of community members on their own experiences, and how these influence their perceptions of dignity, empowerment, and change. Self-reflection represents a way to envision social change and to develop a different and positive narrative about their life (Benequista & Gaventa 2011, 45-47). At the same time, development and aid practitioners should contextualize this information, with the aim to interpret, understand, and translate all underlying meanings. This exercise is crucial in order to empower both the communities' life and NGOs' commitments. The whole analytical process is therefore a conscious process of engagement, where the added value that external, "trained" staff and "experts" within NGOs, is leveraged as per the guidance they can provide to the affected individuals in understanding power and social dynamics.

The CPA, however, is not presented here as the primary solution to the shortcomings of the NGO-ization of women's movements and those of other marginalized groups. Rather, it recognizes the need for organizations to engage directly and proactively with the communities facing oppression in a manner that draws upon their shared injustices, carefully formulating, through continuous self-reflection, pathways for change that confront the status quo. This is not simply a participatory process that factors in the opinions

and needs of an affected population into humanitarian and development programming. Instead, communities take on the responsibility of designing and carrying out their contextually-specific plans, backed by evidence-based emancipatory research managed by community members themselves, gradually eliminating the need for international NGOs to conduct any work on their behalf.

In this way, communities can continue to question the underlying structures of power that exclude them from political processes. The CPA does not seek to assist with the formation of new social movements as way to a counter to the proliferation and shortcomings of NGOs in local civil society; rather, it aims to reduce the barriers that limit communities from taking ownership of programming. In other words, the CPA aims to make organizations more accountable to their local community members by building the agency of the community as a whole to make decisions based on their awareness of existing hegemonic relations that need to be overcome. The proximation between the community and the work carried out on their behalf will ultimately strengthen claims of legitimacy, and allow for greater downwards accountability. These efforts will shift humanitarian and development programming away from the domineering and universal neoliberal application of development work that erodes context-specific and bottom-up alternatives.

## ***Bibliography:***

Alvarez, Sonia E. 2010. "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1(2): 181-209.

Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 35(4): 216-224.

Awashra, Raed, and Majida Awashreh. 2012. "Accountability: A Lingering Dilemma for Palestinian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)." *International NGO Journal* 7(4): 64-72.

Azzam, Fateh. 2014. "NGOs vs. Grassroots Movements: A False Dichotomy." Alshabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network.

Bamberg, Michael G. 2011. *The acquisition of narratives: Learning to use language*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Batliwala, Srilatha. 2007. "Taking the Power Out of Empowerment: An Experiential Account." *Development in Practice* 17, 4-5: 557-565.

Bayat, Asef. 2010. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Benequista, Nicholas & Gaventa, John. 2011. "Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action Across States and Societies." *The Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation & Accountability*.

Brechenmacher, Saskia, and Thomas Carothers, T. 2018. "Examining Civil Society Legitimacy." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Caverzasio, Sylvie Giossi. 2001. *Strengthening protection in war: a search for professional standards, summary of discussions among human rights and humanitarian organizations--workshops at the ICRC, 1996-2000*. Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, Central Tracing Agency and Protection Division.

Crehan, Kate. 2016. *Gramsci's Common Sense: Inequality and its Narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dana, Tariq. 2013. "Palestinian Civil Society: What Went Wrong?" Alshabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network.

Denscombe, Martyn. 2009. *Ground rules for social research: Guidelines for good practice*. New York: Open University Press.

Ibrahim, Solava, and Sabina Alkire. 2007. "Agency and empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators." *Oxford Development Studies* 35(4): 379-403.

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). 2016. "The grand bargain—a shared commitment to better serve people in need."

Jad, Islah. 2004. "The NGO-isation of Arab Women's Movements." *IDS Bulletin* 35: 34-42.

Kabeer, Naila. 1999. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30(3):435-464.

Kamat, Sangeeta. 2003. "The NGO Phenomenon and Political Culture in the Third World." *Development* 46(1): 88-93.

Kamat, Sangeeta. 2004. "The Privatization of Public Interest: Theorizing NGO Discourse in a Neoliberal Era." *Review of International Political Economy* 11(1): 155-176.

Kuttab, Eileen. 2008. "Palestinian Women's Organizations. Global Cooption and Local Contradiction." *Cultural Dynamics* 20(2): 99-117.

Kuttab, Eileen. 2009. "The Palestinian Women's Movement: From Resistance and Liberation to Accommodation and Globalization." *Vents d'Est, vents d'Ouest: Mouvements defemmes et feminismes anticoloniaux*: 101-116.

- Kuttab, Eileen. 2010. "Empowerment as Resistance. Conceptualizing Palestinian Women's Empowerment." *Development* 53(2): 247-253.
- Metcalf-Hough, Victoria, Wendy Fenton, and Lydia Poole. 2019. "Grand Bargain annual independent report." London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11387-grand-bargain-annual-independent-report-2019](http://www.odi.org/publications/11387-grand-bargain-annual-independent-report-2019))
- Mirafatab, Faranak. 1997. "Flirting with the Enemy. Challenges Faced by NGOs in Development and Empowerment." *Habitat International* 21(4): 361-375.
- Pettit, J. Jethro. 2012. "Empowerment and Participation: Bridging the gap between understanding and practice." Institute of Development Studies
- Rowlands, Jo. 1995. "Empowerment Examined." *Development and Social Diversity*. Oxfam: 86-92.
- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B. 2008. "Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American Feminist Perspective on Conceptualising Women's Empowerment." *IDS Bulletin* 39: 18-27.
- UNHCR. 2004. *Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity*.
- van Wessel, Margit. G. J., and W. W. S. Ho. 2018. *Narrative Assessment: A new approach to advocacy monitoring, evaluation, learning and communication*. Hivos.
- World Bank. 2002. *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*.

***Achieving Long  
Term Goals  
on Sexual and  
Gender-Based  
Violence (SGBV)  
Protection in  
Lebanon***

MENAAL MUNSHEY

## ABSTRACT

Lebanon's sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) sector is dominated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), filling the gap left by the state, with support from international donors. The SGBV sector aims to provide holistic services across the country. However, NGOs are often unable to achieve these aims, as donor funding is largely short-term and project-based. As a result, long-term services, specifically shelters and legal aid, are difficult to access for survivors. This article uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 11 NGO representatives and five Syrian refugee survivors of domestic violence to argue that the current funding structure hinders survivors from accessing vital services such as shelters and legal aid. For Syrian refugees in Lebanon, this problem is exacerbated due to a lack of legal assistance for legal residency and official registration. Without this paperwork, Syrian refugee survivors are unlikely and unwilling to access support and justice mechanisms. The present gaps in funding and services impact survivors' protection, safety, and access to justice, and hinders the likelihood of attaining sustainable solutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) protection and response in Lebanon aim to provide holistic services across the country with a survivor-centred approach. Many organizations provide services in-house, while other services require external referrals through a strong referral system. However, funding is scarce and government support is negligible. This is particularly evident in the areas of shelters and legal aid.

Shelters have restrictive admission criteria and accommodate survivors on a short-term basis only. They seem to only accommodate cases that are not considered high risk, for example, survivors with no mental health concerns, and those who are unaccompanied by their children or are otherwise childless. Long-term shelters are acutely limited. In terms of legal aid, legal representation is difficult to access for cases in the personal status courts, and for refugees in need of legal residency and paperwork. These gaps in legal assistance affect survivors' chances of receiving protection and accessing justice.

Within the present donor-funding regime, and without alternative funding streams, NGOs are compelled to prioritise short-term programming, mirroring donor priorities, which leads to gaps in protection for survivors. Long-term services, such as legal aid and shelters, which may be able to provide survivors with sustainable solutions, are elusive. Therefore, this article argues, the aims of the SGBV sector and a survivor-centred approach are difficult to achieve.

Global estimates show that domestic violence is the type of SGBV that women are most frequently subjected to (WHO 2021). For this reason, this article focuses on domestic violence support and access to justice for Lebanese and Syrian survivors, which is provided by NGOs in the context of an SGBV protection and response strategy. This article argues that the present gaps in support and justice relate to the lack of long-term funding, and have adverse consequences for survivors of domestic violence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *SGBV services in Lebanon*

Interventions aimed at addressing SGBV can be broadly categorized into prevention and response (Bartelink and Le Roux 2018). Response includes psychosocial support and case management, which can protect women from future violence and improve their wellbeing. Best practices in SGBV services include creating safe spaces, engaging the community in program design and implementation, conducting safe referrals, utilising a survivor-centred approach, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring accessibility of services (Interagency Standing Committee 2011).

NGOs often step in to provide appropriate support for women survivors, whether Lebanese or Syrian refugees, to fill the gap left by the state (Human Rights Watch 2015). NGOs aim at providing holistic, survivor-centred support for all forms of SGBV through psychosocial support, economic, legal, and medical assistance (UNFPA 2010). Specialised centres and a limited number of shelters operate in Lebanon, and provide a range of primary health care services and counselling for SGBV survivors. These centres are run by local NGOs (such as ABAAD or KAFA) with the help of governmental and international organizations (AiW 2018). There is a national referral system in place for services coordinated by the Government of Lebanon (GoL) and the UN-SGBV Taskforce (Munshey 2018). The UN-SGBV Taskforce is the main structure overseeing the coordination of SGBV services for both refugees and Lebanese. The taskforce gathers NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies, and various government ministries, and is predominantly tied to the availability of international donor funding (UNFPA 2020). However, several studies highlight problems with coordination, especially in ensuring that SGBV survivors have access to the numerous services they need including health care and legal aid (Holmes and Bhuvanendra 2014). Local NGOs have struggled with improving access to legal services and security for survivors due to the lack of resources (UNFPA 2018). Similarly, due to the protracted and relatively stable nature of the Syrian crisis, lines between the humanitarian and development response, and thereby also funding, are increasingly unclear (Development Initiatives, 2019).

### ***SGBV and domestic violence prevalence***

Estimates published by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that, globally, about 1 in 3 (30%) women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence (WHO 2021). While this trend is probably also true in Lebanon, there is limited data on the prevalence of SGBV (United Nations Human Rights 2014). One pilot study shows that 40.6% of female patients of the Resident Clinics at the American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC) are physically abused by their spouse (Awwad et al. 2014). Data from the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) finds that violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member accounts for 71% of the incidents reported in Lebanon (2016). The GBVIMS data in 2016 further showed quarterly increases in reports of intimate partner violence, with physical assault, psychological/emotional abuse, and sexual assault being the most highly reported types of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member (GBVIMS 2016).

Syrian women in Lebanon face a continuum of SGBV risks, including public SGBV risks such as harassment and assault, and private SGBV risks such as child marriage,

intimate partner violence, and domestic violence by their husbands' relatives (Roupetz et al. 2020). The GBVIMS data highlights the most commonly reported forms of violence against Syrian refugees as being physical assault, domestic and sexual violence, denial of resources, and both child and forced marriage (Kevorkian 2016). Physical violence perpetrated by husbands was the most commonly reported form of intimate partner violence (IPV) among Syrian refugees (Roupetz et al. 2020). IPV is thought to be exacerbated among displaced Syrian families due to the frustration men experience when their lives are disrupted, and traditional gender roles are challenged (El-Masri, Harvey and Garwood 2013).

### ***Legal routes for domestic violence***

The Lebanese Constitution does not provide for a civil code that regulates marriages, divorce or other family matters – these are governed by the religious “personal status” courts (Panchetti 2017). There are 15 personal status laws applied by 18 different recognized religious sects in the country. This legal setting is considered to be, in and of itself, discriminatory toward women (Barakat 2018). Survivors of domestic violence may approach personal status courts to seek separation, divorce, and/or custody.

For immediate protection, the most likely legal avenue for survivors is through new domestic violence legislation passed in 2014, which penalises various forms of interpersonal violence, particularly intimate partner violence (Barakat 2018). Current assessments suggest that the new domestic violence legislation (Law 293) suffers from legal flaws and a lack of implementation (Moussawi and Yassin 2017).

It should be noted that Law 293 states that if provisions of the new domestic violence law are contradictory to the personal status laws, priority is given to the latter (UNFPA 2018). In addition, Law 293 does not include any provision explicitly addressing how to settle conflicts that may emerge between civil court rulings on domestic violence and religious personal status courts judgments (UNFPA 2018). In reality, women often have multiple legal references: criminal, civil, and sectarian, in resolving disputes over personal status and claiming their rights, given the multiplicity of jurisdictions and the complexity of the cases.

### ***Barriers to accessing justice***

Most women cannot afford legal services and litigation, especially since legal proceedings are often lengthy (UNFPA 2018). Financial pressure forces many women to drop proceedings in cases of divorce and custody (UNFPA 2018). Claiming one's rights in Lebanon's religious courts is definitely expensive, costing anywhere between 1,000 to

14,000 USD in 2018 (Barakat 2018). The actual cost of justice is staggering relative to the Lebanese minimum wage, which was 450 USD per month in 2018 (Barakat 2018). The procedural fees at the Christian courts are notorious for being high in Lebanon, and are, arguably, intentionally so in order to discourage divorce (Barakat 2018). Formal court fees in the Sunni courts are much lower overall (Barakat 2018). However, the cost of informal fees is also high, including transportation costs. With the effects of the recent and ongoing economic crisis, the financial burden of legal proceedings is likely to be higher and accessing justice is likely to have increased barriers.

Religious institutions do not provide adequate and sustainable legal or social support for women who initiate proceedings before personal status courts (UNFPA 2018). In Sunni courts, for example, there are provisions for the reduction of court fees; however, litigants are generally unaware of these and they are rarely used (Barakat 2018). Christian courts also have mechanisms to support low-income individuals; however, they are difficult to access (Barakat 2018).

There are provisions for legal aid provided by Bar Associations. However, they are usually not used in personal status cases since it is assumed that litigants can represent themselves in religious courts, although in reality, as Oxfam found, it is key for a litigant's success to have legal representation (Barakat 2018). Lawyers on the Bar Association's pro-bono list are discouraged to provide free services in personal status cases as they are lengthy and require significant engagement (Barakat 2018). Practically, many women are unaware of the Bar Association's existence and the relevant procedures to receive such aid (UNFPA 2018).

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have inadequate recourse to justice, and face specific barriers to accessing justice (International Alert 2017). Legal support is largely provided by NGO partners (LCRP 2021). For refugees, the procedural obstacles associated with the legal status of refugee women remain the most important impediments to access to the formal justice system (International Alert 2017). Today, approximately 70% of the Syrians in Lebanon lack legal documentation issued by the Lebanese authorities, according to a survey conducted in mid-2015 (International Alert 2017). The focus of existing legal aid programs is less on strategic litigation, and more on administrative procedures and civil documentation (Johnsen 2020). Lack of documents and low trust in state authorities also hinder refugees' access to the justice system (International Alert 2017).

### ***Methodology***

This study is qualitative in nature. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five survivors and 11 experts. Sample recruitment of both victims and professionals was

made through purposive and snowball sampling by contacting various nongovernmental entities across the country based on their relevance to SGBV response in Lebanon. The following criteria were used to recruit survivors: interviewees would include Syrian refugees in Lebanon; interviewees would be or have been victims of domestic violence; and interviewees would have attempted to access support and/or justice. In other words, they would have contacted an NGO and they would have been provided with some legal information. To maintain their anonymity, victims have been given pseudonyms, and the experts' organizations have not been named due to ethical considerations.

The sample of five survivors included:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Location</b>
Syrian Refugee A	Bekaa
Syrian Refugee B	Bekaa
Syrian Refugee C	Bekaa
Syrian Refugee D	Bekaa
PRS (Palestinian Refugee from Syria) Survivor	Burj al Barajneh Camp

The sample of 11 experts included:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Organization</b>
NGO GBV Specialist 1	International NGO
NGO GBV Specialist 2	International NGO
INGO Protection Officer	International NGO
UN Agency SGBV Specialist 1	UN Agency
UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2	UN Agency
UN Agency Refugee Specialist	UN Agency
UN Agency Legal Officer	UN Agency
Syrian NGO Representation	Syrian NGO
GBV Case Worker Bekaa	Lebanese NGO
Male NGO Representative Bekaa	Lebanese NGO
Female Social Worker Bekaa	Lebanese NGO

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted; interviews with experts took 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews with victims were approximately 90 minutes long. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in a professional setting, for example at an NGO office

or centre. The researcher used an interpreter for the interviews with victims that were conducted in Arabic. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a translator, and then checked by the original interpreter. Informed consent was taken from all interviewees verbally, and an information sheet was provided to interviewees with the researcher's name, email address, and information regarding the study. Analysis of the dataset was conducted by applying thematic analysis to transcripts from the full sample.

Although efforts were made to avoid limitations in this study, some include potential translation inaccuracies and a small sample size of survivors and experts. Although efforts were made to recruit a larger sample, survivors are a hard to reach population that might be unwilling to participate and difficult to recruit (Chamberlain and Hodgetts 2018). Experts were the key to practical insider knowledge (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2018). Although the number of interviewees was small in scale, the richness of the data collection and the process of analysis enhance the rigor of the study.

## THEMATIC FINDINGS

This article centres around the following themes:

- (1) NGO aims and donor policies, highlighting that holistic and accessible services are difficult to achieve within present short-term funding structures;
- (2) Gaps in protection and capacity of shelters specifically those that provide long-term options for survivors;
- (3) Gaps in the provision of legal aid, and additional barriers to access support and justice for refugees, which are largely based on a lack of legal documentation.

### ***Theme 1: NGO aims and donor policies***

Sufficient allocation of resources is essential to combatting SGBV and has largely not been achieved in the Arab region. In Lebanon, governmental budgetary commitments for the implementation of SGBV legislation to support relevant NGOs' activities do not exist (ESCWA, forthcoming). SGBV cross-sectoral work largely relies on external funding, is deprioritised by national budgets, and is substantially under-funded. In Lebanon, the shortage and inconsistencies of funding promotes a project-oriented approach, rather than a sustained programmatic plan (UNFPA 2020).

Interviewees expressed the importance of geographical accessibility of holistic services for survivors of SGBV. However, it is difficult for NGOs to achieve these aims due to

short-term funding and donor's programmatic priorities. Interviewees from NGOs expressed difficulties in obtaining consistent funding for sustainable initiatives. Despite their aims, it is difficult for NGOs to provide holistic services across the country within the present donor-funding regime. There are also no other viable funding streams identified by interviewees.

### ***Referrals and accessibility of holistic services***

Caseworkers stated that after a woman reports SGBV, the case management process begins.<sup>1</sup> An initial assessment leads to a range of available services for SGBV survivors which may provide immediate relief, such as shelters, mental or physical health care, or more long-term services, such as training, empowerment activities, and legal services:

*"We provide the full spectrum of available options to survivors and they choose how to address the incident, and then we facilitate the access to the services. Areas of focus for high-risk cases include emergency shelters, mental health services, and clinical management of rape. In the longer run, services also include vocational training, empowerment activities, psychosocial support,<sup>2</sup> and legal services. So we also refer cases to shelters for example, or to other organizations, because we do not provide all the services." (INGO GBV Specialist 1)*

The approach that this interviewee describes is survivor-centred, and enables survivors to make an informed decision about the type of support they wish to access. As she highlights, most organizations provide some services in-house, whereas other services require external referrals. This often means that survivors have to visit multiple locations, and must speak to multiple people to access the entire spectrum of services (Anani 2013). The clinical management of rape, for example, would require a visit to a healthcare service provider for essential medical care, such as documentation of injuries, collection of forensic evidence, treatment of injuries, etc. (WHO and UNHCR 2004).

Interviewees noted that strong referral pathways were in place for survivors to seek support. After cases are identified or come forward, referrals reportedly take place in a range of sectors and locations. "Referrals are based on the governorate which are also broken down into villages, streets, to make sure we cover as much as possible," said UN Agency SGBV Specialist 1. The aim, she notes, is to increase the geographical accessibility to a range of services.

---

1 For a definition of case management, please see: Interagency GBV Case Management Guidelines 2017.

2 The term psychosocial is used to emphasize the interaction between the psychological aspects of human beings and their environment or social surroundings. Please see: Interagency GBV Case Management Guidelines 2017.

NGOs aim to provide consistent access to services across the country. As a Social Worker in Bekaa said, “The services here are just like the ones offered in Beirut, holistic case management for SGBV women and children. We offer holistic case management, legal, psychological, and social services. We collaborate with other NGOs and stakeholders, service providers, and the services needed for children, we collaborate with psychiatrists, dispensaries, shelters.” This collaboration is enabled by a strong referral system. However, she acknowledged that this approach has shortcomings. “I think the approach should be more holistic. To have a hospital, dispensary, department, ISF specialised for responding to SGBV cases” (GBV Case Worker Bekaa). She explains that providing multiple services in one location would improve access for survivors.

A female survivor of domestic violence concurred with the practitioners’ views and expressed geographical proximity as being a factor in enabling access to support:

*“Someone introduced me to this NGO and I did not know there was an office in Bekaa. I went and I told them my story and my problem, and that I don’t have the [financial] means, and that I want my rights and I don’t want to give them up. I am not someone who he [the husband] just married for a couple of days and had his way with and then divorced [...] [The NGO] asked me where I am from, where I am staying, before they asked me anything. I told them I was in Bekaa and they told me that they have an office there, if I would like to go there to save on transportation costs. I said okay, and I took an appointment and I came and spoke to a social worker, and I signed up for some activities and sessions, and I got an appointment with a lawyer.” (Syrian Refugee A)*

She benefitted from the fact that the NGO had an office in Bekaa and paid for transportation costs for her to visit their center. She was able to access a range of services due to the ease of geographical access.

### ***Short-term funding and donor policies***

Despite their objectives, it is difficult for NGOs to provide holistic services across the country within the present donor-funding regime. Interviewees from NGOs expressed difficulties in obtaining consistent funding for sustainable initiatives. Instead, donors prioritise short-term programming and funding is focused on certain geographical areas.

Interviewees from NGOs reported an overall lack of funding of services for the SGBV sector. “The big gap that we have is the very limited funding, especially for [SGBV]. You need funding to have stability in the program and to work in the communities extensively. It’s also linked in terms of programs finishing. While they are being progressively strengthened, national systems are not up to providing services for the cases that we have. If tomorrow funding disappears it’s a problem,” said UN Agency SGBV Specialist 1. Her comment highlights the SGBV sector’s dependence on foreign funding which results in. There appear to be no other substantial funding streams.

NGOs outside Beirut also expressed difficulties in obtaining consistent funding. “When you are implementing a project and then the money from the funding you received has finished then it will be very difficult for you to get more funding because it is very competitive” (Male NGO Representative Bekaa). Funding is reportedly competitive to obtain and there is a perceived inequality between the NGOs that receive funding and those that do not. Interviewees felt that NGOs in Beirut are able to obtain funding, whereas NGOs operating in more remote areas, such as Bekaa, despite being closer to Syrian beneficiaries, face greater difficulties obtaining funding (Mourtada, Schlecht and DeJong 2017).

*“One of the problems in this system is the channelling of funding from those who have money to those who are working in the field. [...] The NGOs in Beirut are more closely connected to the ministries. [...] Even the educational level and experience of the employees in the Beirut centers are much better than those in other rural areas and all these make a difference to funding. [...] Beirut is a capital, like all developing countries, all the focus of the politicians goes to the development of the capital, so yes you will find a difference between here and Beirut concerning funding, structure, structure of the system, the power of the Social Development Centres,<sup>3</sup> their work, their activities. [...] [In Bekaa] we are the biggest disaster area of Lebanon, and Baalbeck alone is a quarter of the whole Lebanese territory in terms of space, so the approach is that it will cost us more to reach the cases in remote village than in Beirut.” (Male NGO Representative Bekaa)*

This interviewee reported discrepancies in donor-funding allocation, and a perceived bias towards Beirut, which is problematic given the demand for services in the areas with a high concentration of refugees and low development indicators, such as Bekaa. This is contrary to NGOs’ claims to provide SGBV services across Lebanon to those who are most vulnerable.

Many NGOs also found it difficult to obtain funding for everyday administrative or non-programmatic costs: “The first side [of funding] is the internal average cost of the organization, this is done through private funding. The other side is programs funding which depends on the donors and every penny that is given to the projects is spent on that project” (Female Social Worker Bekaa). In her view, donors are not keen on funding long term or administrative costs. Instead, donors are inclined towards funding short-term projects focused on specific themes or objectives. This affects the sustainability of service provision: “When it comes to programs related to providing services, then the service is over when the funding is over [...] for service programs like water, sanitation

---

3 Social Development Centres (SDCs) exist in different regions of Lebanon, tasked with the implementation of MoSA’s policies on the ground. In some governorates, SDCs are responsible for extending their health and education services to Syrian refugees. Please see: Huelzer and Divine 2020.

and hygiene, or distribution, yes of course when the funding is short there will be no services and this is one of the major problems facing sustainability of projects” (Male NGO Representative Bekaa). Another interviewee added: “when we talk about concrete service provision, we need more money. We have so many emergency services that are completely missing, many survivors end up slipping through the cracks” (INGO GBV Specialist 1). Interviewees discussed how a lack of funding impacts the sustainability of initiatives and has human costs. This may explain gaps in protection for long-term interventions such as shelters and legal aid. Obstacles to women’s access to justice arise because of the scarcity of resources dedicated to addressing violence against women within the justice system, and the unavailability of other services necessary to protect survivors, such as shelters (International Commission of Jurists, 2019).

### ***Theme 2: Gaps in protection and shelters***

Shelters provide temporary housing and protection for individuals who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, interpersonal violence (Bartels et al. 2019). Evidence shows that the use of shelters can reduce violence, especially when measured in the longer term, and can help women to feel safer, more hopeful, and more knowledgeable about safety strategies once they leave (Jewkes 2014). In Lebanon, one study found that women and girls who had accessed a shelter were statistically more likely to indicate that the major benefit derived from the shelter was safety/protection, compared to women and girls who had accessed a mobile program or a static/non-shelter program (Bartels et al. 2019).

Shelters are primarily provided by NGOs and charitable organizations in Lebanon, and have no national regulatory requirements (UNESCWA 2019). Shelters are often left to rely on outside funding to maintain their operations, with many shelters relying solely on international donors for their funding. Heavy reliance on international funding threatens their sustainability (UNESCWA 2019). Previous research in Lebanon has found that the lack of shelters remains a core gap, and constitutes an obstacle to women’s access to safety, protection, and justice (UNFPA 2018).

This article finds that existing shelters are restrictive in their admission criteria and have limited capacity. Most long-term shelters have a religious nature and may be construed as exclusionary on the basis of religion. In addition, while all shelters are open to refugees and Lebanese nationals, there is insufficient capacity to accommodate all potential beneficiaries. Shelters may use this justification to exclude Syrian refugees, thereby acutely limiting their options for protection. As interviewees show, limited funding and donor priorities impact the lack of shelters for SGBV survivors. This article argues that the lack of shelters correlates to short-term funding provided by donors, and ultimately has an adverse impact on survivors’ ability to access sustainable solutions.

## **Short-term shelters**

Existing shelters reportedly provide short-term solutions. “Shelters are a huge gap. A lot of them are short-term and don’t allow you to have your children with you etc.” said INGO GBV Specialist 1, highlighting the lack of shelters and restrictive criterion for admission. Many interviewees also highlighted that existing shelters have limited capacity:

*"For example we have three mid-way houses,<sup>4</sup> managed by ABAAD [that are] short-term solutions, 2-3 months maximum, except if it is super critical, then they stay for six months, but usually 2-3 months until you find, with the survivor, a more durable solution whether it is a longer term shelter, or linking them to livelihood opportunities to generate income, or to be able to be independent. Otherwise, they would have to go back to the violence. There aren't many options. [...] None of them [shelters] in Lebanon, none of the shelters accept survivors with mental health disorders, none of them. The mid-way houses accept survivors with mental health issues and they provide actual psychiatric consultation and psychotropic medication, which are run by ABAAD." (UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2)*

This interviewee highlights the short-term nature of these shelters, and the lack of long-term options. After staying in a short-term shelter, survivors are often referred onwards to a long-term or collective shelter. Significantly, shelters largely do not allow survivors with mental health concerns.

GBV-specific shelters reportedly have limited capacity. This could result in multiple referrals for the survivor, and consequently might delay their access to protection and safety. From the perspective of the receiving shelter, a social worker explained the process that starts once a referral is received:

*Sometimes, we don't have a safe space [where the survivor] can stay. We have some collaboration with UNHCR shelters but they are not safe spaces. The difference is that a collective shelter is just a building where many families live and there's no privacy or security. It's in the middle of the city, it's just there for vulnerable families but not GBV cases. Safe spaces are for GBV cases specifically. [Survivors] want a safe space where they are far away from the area [where they live] and no one knows where [it is] and there's a safe structure with rules and usually women will be under rehabilitation in these safe spaces. These collective shelters have a lot of GBV cases and sometimes we do not find places and we need to put the woman in a safe space for a short while [...] for refugees, we collaborate with Caritas. They have a lot of safe spaces. We collaborate with the focal point and we refer to a shelter in Caritas because they have three safe spaces. We put important priority to the rehabilitation program and the security of women. [...] We do not refer [women] to the region where they live; we refer them to an outside area and transportation is provided by this NGO. (GBV Case Worker Bekaa)*

---

4 Please see: ABAAD 2013 at <https://www.abaadmena.org/direct-services/safe-shelters>.

This interviewee highlights the compromising situation women can find themselves in if they are referred to a collective shelter, due to a lack of designated safe spaces for SGBV survivors. While safe spaces can also focus on rehabilitation, as well as physical safety of the survivors, collective shelters are not specifically set up for survivors of domestic violence, and therefore are not a preferred option. However, due to a lack of capacity, survivors may be referred to collective shelters by NGOs.

Worse, collective shelters are also reported to have strict admission criteria. One INGO Protection Officer described collective shelters as follows:

*"It's a shelter that accepts people transitioning out of protection risk, and who have not yet established a stable state. We provide them with training, life skills training, and we help them to transition out [of protection risk]. Our collective shelter is quite particular in its design as there are a lot of collective shelters in Lebanon. We cannot take in people who are at high risk such as a severe mental health issue because we do not have specialised people to take care of them. We accommodate the elderly sometimes or specific needs. This is the function of the collective shelter. Admission happens based on a team meeting; they assess the case and decide whether to admit or not. [...] Usually every two families are sharing one kitchen and they have their own bathrooms. We have a shelter supervisor, and caretakers to help manage the shelter." (INGO Protection Officer)*

This interviewee highlights the services that are provided in collective shelters, and that the reason for denying admission to those with special needs is due to a lack of trained personnel. In collective shelters, women can stay for a maximum of six months, with "children up to nine years and for children above nine, we assess it case by case and depending on the case, we decide whether the child can stay or not. However, we accept SGBV survivors who are not at high risk at the time of admission" (INGO Protection Officer). Admission criterion for collective shelters, therefore, exclude women with mental health issues, with children above nine years of age, and those who are at high risk. This severely disadvantages survivors facing multiple or compounded issues.

As the interviewee above mentioned, even NGOs that run their own collective shelters refer high-risk cases to other shelters (such as those operated by ABAAD) due to their own low capacity and restrictive criteria for admission to the collective shelter. Through the referral system, it appears that many organizations refer to the same handful of shelters: "We also refer cases to shelters, for example to other organizations, because we do not provide all the services. [...] For emergency shelters, we rely on some organizations because it is not sustainable for one NGO to provide all services. We refer to a shelter in the North and in the Bekaa run by ABAAD. KAFA has one in Beirut. These are the big ones," said INGO GBV Specialist 1. As she says, NGOs are unable to provide multiple services, which she attributes to a difficulty in "sustaining" the NGO in terms of resources.

There appear to be a limited number of shelters in various parts of the country, which puts survivors outside Beirut at a severe disadvantage, and is contrary to the sector's aims of providing equitable services. "Another challenge we face is the saturation of shelters where we do not have space for new cases. And the most problematic cases are the ones with mental health issues because we do not have shelters for these cases. So we don't know what to do with these cases," said the INGO Protection Officer. This demonstrates a key gap in admission to shelters – only low risk cases are accepted, and most likely, their children will not be allowed. This excludes many survivors from accessing safety and protection.

Another interviewee highlighted that options for shelters are reduced in many circumstances: "Shelters are limited. They are short-term, limited in numbers, and limited due to admissions criteria, because sometimes shelters choose Lebanese nationals over Syrian nationals or sometimes mothers and children can't be hosted in the shelters" (UN Agency Refugee Specialist). While all shelters are open to residents or nationals of Lebanon, there is insufficient capacity to accommodate all beneficiaries. Shelters may use this justification to deny admission of Syrian refugees. For Syrian victims of domestic violence, options for protection may be acutely limited, as shelter admission criteria can be restrictive and potentially discriminatory.

### ***Long-term shelters***

In terms of long-term shelters, survivors are severely restricted in the options available to them. Interviewees criticised the practices of long-term shelters and highlighted the restrictive admission criteria, especially for survivors with mental health concerns, or those who do not abide by the religious nature of the shelter. Such practices appear to be discriminatory on the basis of religion, and are contrary to the sector's aims of inclusion and rehabilitation. Despite this, NGOs have not set up long-term shelters in recent years, potentially because NGOs often are forced to "follow the money" to secure their survival and are thus subject to short-term grants and a lack of core funding to engage in long-term interventions (UNESCWA 2019, 46). "For the longer term shelters, we have 10-15, very few, and they have very strict and rigid guidelines. [...] Most of them are religious, and yes, if you are Muslim and you are going to a certain shelter, you have to pray with them. Even if I (the survivor) am Christian and I don't want to pray, so like, what the hell? Plus you can't have children with you. For boys who are older than 11 years old, different criteria apply," said the UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2. These criteria, especially the prohibition on children accompanying their mothers, limits survivors' options and appears to implement a religious program on residents despite their religious beliefs.

Long-term shelters presently are primarily of a religious nature, and differ from the wider SGBV sector in terms of case management and approach. “You have alternative options that don't fit with the mission of the organization [UN Agency]. There is one run by a religious mission, and to my knowledge, we are not working with this alternative shelter now” (UN Agency Refugee Specialist). Most long-term shelters are affiliated with particular religious communities or associations, deterring women of different faiths from reaching out to them (ABAAD 2017). The UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2 gives more insights into the realities of long-term shelters in Lebanon:

*"All the long-term shelters in Lebanon, none of them accept any survivors with mental health disorders, which is ironic of course [...] and even the services in the shelters, to be transparent, are not the best. I am not sure what kind of case management they do provide. [...] If I decided I don't want to talk to God, or I am an atheist, then what? And it is not evidence- or trial-based, and it is definitely not participatory."*

In her view, the safety and case management plans used in long-term shelters are not based on empirical research or modern methodology.

Interviewees demonstrated that short-term funding correlates with a lack of shelters in Lebanon. One interviewee gave the example of Bekaa, where the majority of Syrian refugees live: “There were two safe shelters, at least that we know of. One was closed due to funding problems. [...] There was an Islamic organization as well that started a shelter, but there was an issue with funding, and it was shut down. So, these shelters receive funding at first and they open, and then when the funding stops they close” (Female Social Worker Bekaa). “The cost of shelters is perceived as a lot by the donors so usually, unfortunately, it is difficult to find funding,” said UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2, linking the lack of long-term funding available with the limited number of shelters for SGBV survivors. As interviewees show, limited funding and donor priorities impact the lack of shelters for SGBV survivors. Unsurprisingly, donors lean towards short-term interventions rather than long-term projects, such as shelters, with relatively high running costs.

### ***Theme 3: Gaps in legal aid for survivors***

Previous research has shown that women face many social and economic barriers in accessing justice in cases of domestic violence (Gallagher 2012). In Lebanon, a significant barrier to accessing justice includes the lack of legal aid (Barakat 2018). Barriers to access justice are exacerbated for Syrian refugees as they may fear biased treatment from Lebanese state authorities, and they largely lack legal paperwork. Obtaining legal paperwork is often complex and difficult, and without this, Syrian refugees are practically excluded from accessing the justice system.

### ***Legal awareness sessions and counselling***

In terms of providing legal aid, the process described by NGO representatives begins with legal information provided at awareness-raising sessions, continues to individual legal counselling, and potentially progresses to legal representation for matters relating to protection orders under Law 293, or divorce and custody proceedings in personal status courts (Munshey 2018). For refugees, there is an additional layer of procedures for legal documentation, registration, and paperwork, which can be overwhelming and confusing for a layperson.

NGO representatives explained that legal information is provided to communities as part of awareness-raising sessions. “If there is a need by the community members to know about some legal aspects, we can discuss them in the awareness sessions, whereby we tell them that in case you are experiencing this type of (domestic) violence, then there is this law which can protect you” (Female Social Worker Bekaa). This is often the beneficiaries’ first interaction with legal information relating to domestic violence.

Practitioners described a range of reactions when legal information related to domestic violence is provided to the community:

*"When it comes to women, the majority will try to take part and react positively to the topics. In some cases, they try to do this on their own before taking the legal path. Others do not react, either because they are afraid, or because they know that community ties are stronger than the law itself. Other people react negatively, and say this is men's right and that it is normal, and so they don't make any comments." (Female Social Worker Bekaa)*

This interviewee also reported that while some beneficiaries were responsive to awareness sessions on domestic violence, others may be skeptical because of their own experience of living in a closed community with limited rule of law. Others accept or justify the violence that either they have experienced themselves, or someone they know has. In addition, legal cynicism contributes to a lack of faith in pursuing legal remedies.

Similarly, another interviewee highlighted how difficult such awareness-raising sessions can be: “We face a lot of arguments and criticism of our work and approach. We do not aim to convince [participants and beneficiaries], but at least, we can let them know about the laws and their rights. You cannot change their mentality in a single awareness session,” said the GBV Case Worker Bekaa in reference to entrenched societal thinking. “There are women who also justify men’s actions; who think that if a woman hadn’t behaved a certain way, then the man wouldn’t have hit her, and that therefore, it is her fault,” noted the Male NGO Representative Bekaa, highlighting the fact that women beneficiaries, in some instances, engage in victim-blaming, as well.

Awareness-raising sessions also focus on providing legal information, as the INGO Protection Officer highlighted at length:

*"During awareness sessions, we provide information regarding Law 293. But sometimes, the information can be too technical, and that's why after each session, we provide individual legal counselling for each case, so that the participants can understand what options are available for their particular case, and this is something that the participants have expressly said is important. Under our legal program, we engage in all types of counselling, assistance, and registration targeting GBV survivors. Counselling is also targeting all laws present in Lebanon related to violence and families, Law 422, 293, domestic violence, and residency, birth registration, and civil documentation assistance, as well."*

Counselling sessions also aim to provide women with information about all of the legal options available to them. As the GBV Case Worker from the Bekaa noted, "Most women come asking for legal consultation at the beginning. They want to know their rights in civil and religious courts. Usually, we offer legal consultation so the women can know what choices they have, and after that, they can take the legal procedure if they wish, or go back to her husband, or stay pending. It's up to the women to decide." Although the options are provided during counselling, "Very few survivors accept being referred to legal services" (INGO GBV Specialist 2). NGO interviewees say that very few women opt to approach civil courts for protection orders under Law 293, or initiate divorce proceedings in personal status courts. This is consistent with victimization data from around the world, which shows that women are often reluctant to report domestic violence and initiate legal proceedings (WHO 2015).

### ***Legal representation***

Survivors of domestic violence may seek justice through civil courts by obtaining protection orders under Law 293, and/or through personal status courts if they seek divorce and/or custody of their children. Previous research shows that cases in personal status courts in Lebanon are lengthy and expensive (Human Rights Watch 2015). Approaching a civil court using Law 293 does not require a lawyer, and all legal expenses and fees can be waived (UNFPA 2018). However, in both situations, this article finds that a lawyer's role in navigating the system is beneficial for women survivors of intimate partner violence who are attempting to exit abusive marriages. In addition, NGO support throughout the legal process is key to empowering survivors.

During case management, legal information is provided to beneficiaries to help them decide which legal route they wish to pursue, if any.

*"If the case is a survivor of domestic violence, we explain their rights and their options and the services that are available. If the case is a high risk one in need of protection, we try to issue an*

*immediate protection order. If the survivor decides that she wants a divorce and she is aware of all the consequences, we refer [her] to legal counselling and representation." (INGO Protection Officer)*

As described, survivors of domestic violence require legal assistance on multiple fronts: immediate measures such as protection orders; long-term solutions such as divorce and custody; and for refugees, procedural measures such as civil registration and paperwork.

As many interviewees discussed, whether in a civil or personal status court, legal and associated costs can be burdensome for litigants. Costs are especially high in personal status court proceedings: "In personal status courts, you have to pay a lot of money because it is super corrupt" (UN Agency SGBV Specialist 2). Personal status courts are widely perceived to be corrupt, and bribery is involved at multiple levels of any court procedure (Barakat 2018, 39). Even in civil courts, interviewees reported litigants' incurring costs. As one interviewee noted: "A protection order does not need a lawyer, so it does not cost much, but not many women would go on their own, mainly because they don't know it is available, or because they are afraid that it is something new to them. [...] Of course it will cost them money" (UN Agency Legal Officer). She refers here to legal fees, as well as other informal or transport-related costs.

Interviewees report that obtaining legal representation from NGOs for personal status court cases is difficult, whereas for shorter procedures like protection orders, it is easier to obtain legal aid through NGOs. As the UN Agency SGBV Specialist 1 noted:

*They [survivors] have access to protection and safety depending on needs, and [access to] legal services. Progressively we have strengthened legal service provision. Services available include birth and marriage registration for civil documentation. For family laws, the services are much more limited. There are legal counselling services provided but there are not a lot specialized in family laws, only CARITAS, Legal Agenda, and a few other organizations. But a lot of organizations have their own lawyers on call to support protection orders if needed.*

There appears to be a lack of SGBV-specific legal assistance in civil courts (relating to obtaining a protection order under Law 293) and personal status courts (relating to divorce or custody), and NGOs do not offer comprehensive legal services for female survivors of domestic violence.

*Presently, legal assistance for personal status courts is reported to be outsourced. "There is legal protection, but unfortunately there is no one working on this topic [in our organization] [...] what we do is introduce them to other agencies that will tackle these legal issues" (Female Social Worker Bekaa). A representative from one INGO said: "We have legal assistance that is available, and it covers everything from legal awareness sessions, the broad prevention stuff and individual counselling including administrative support. Sometimes, our beneficiaries might require legal representation, but for that we get someone to do the work, including in religious courts" (INGO GBV Specialist 1).*

NGOs often provide the beneficiary with a referral to a lawyer. INGO GBV Specialist 1 further shed light on the model that is used by NGOs when engaging lawyers: “Any organization cannot hire a full-time registered lawyer as per the law in Lebanon. That means everybody is basically [working as] a consultant, except for the awareness sessions. So everybody is a freelancer.” As she notes, this freelance or consultancy model requires a further referral to a lawyer, which may entail the survivor making further visits to multiple locations.

However, interviewees say, after a legal referral, the NGO must follow-up to ensure that the beneficiary has access to legal services: “For legal services, we refer and follow up, and it’s very difficult. We know that even when we want the legal service, and even the beneficiary is trying her best, she can’t go with the legal service. So we push a lot, and it takes a lot of time, and even when it starts, it’s very slow” (INGO GBV Specialist 2). This support continues throughout the legal process:

*We are working on empowering women and are always pushing them to get their rights on their own. After every session at the court, they come for a consultation session. If we reach a moment when a woman loses her strength or the judges are being discriminatory, we go to the court representation with them. (GBV Case Worker Bekaa)*

Survivors need continued support from NGOs while attempting to access justice through difficult judicial processes, especially in cases of custody where women face the threat of losing their children. As one interviewee said, “Custody is the biggest pressure, and it depends on the religious courts and then psychological factors depending on the cycle of violence and how much they want to divorce. So these are challenges, and you need to put a lot of effort into counselling before proceeding” (INGO Protection Officer). She emphasizes the need for mental health support before proceeding with legal routes, as they are psychologically difficult for the litigant. The legal system itself presents challenges to women through discriminatory laws, which has associated implications and costs for the SGBV protection sector. Within such a discriminatory legal system, survivors face multiple financial, social and psychological pressures when accessing justice, which NGOs attempt to alleviate.

Interviews with survivors of domestic violence show that hiring a lawyer is a key economic burden, especially for refugees. As Syrian Refugee A reported:

*I wanted to [hire] a lawyer, but I don’t have the means to hire one, and people told me that I would have to spend [my entire dowry] all on the lawyer, and we are displaced Syrians. I have been looking for a job for a year and a half, and I haven’t been able to find one.*

Without the assistance of NGOs, survivors spoke of being unable to access legal

representation. “Kafa supported me psychologically and emotionally, and they provided a lawyer who is following up on my case, because I don’t have the means to pay for [a lawyer], so he is handling my cases and he is representing me in court” (Syrian Refugee B). She said she was hesitant to begin the legal process at first due to the financial strain of hiring a lawyer, and has been able to continue legal proceedings due to the multifaceted support provided by the NGO.

Interviewees also highlight the long process of obtaining legal representation, and speak of multiple referrals by organizations before finally obtaining representation. PRS Survivor narrated her experience of initially approaching an NGO in the camp, who then referred her to ABAAD, who then referred her to an INGO, who finally referred her to a lawyer. She had to visit each office separately, which was time consuming and difficult as she lives in a Palestinian camp. She mentioned that her transportation costs were paid for when she visited ABAAD. However, at the INGO, they “covered my expenses, but not the transportation costs” (PRS Survivor). While PRS Survivor was provided a lawyer by an NGO, however, she described their interaction as distressing. “A problem occurred, and I was very upset because I didn’t understand why he [the lawyer] hadn’t informed me about [the problem] before, and they kept making me go back and forth, and I started crying because [the lawyer] took away any semblance of hope I had before” (PRS Survivor). According to her, the lawyer did not communicate effectively, provide emotional support, or deal with her case with sensitivity. This is an aspect that might be different if lawyers were able to be employed over the longterm by NGOs, thereby building exclusive expertise in domestic violence cases, and/or benefit from sensitivity training by experienced social workers enabling them to better support litigants through the legal process.

The support provided by NGOs during legal processes is important to interviewees: “ABAAD has supported me a lot. Even though I don’t have any work or relations with them anymore, they still contact me and ask about any progress in my case, and they encourage me to keep moving forward” (PRS Survivor). She demonstrates that continuing support and encouragement by NGOs is a determining factor in providing strength to women survivors of GBV.

The lack of legal assistance offered by NGOs is also linked to the lack of longterm funding:

*It is not a reluctance [to work in personal status courts], but a lot of it is related to the resources available, and cases [in personal status courts] are very expensive and take a long time [to litigate]. When resources are scarce, which is the case right now, what we maintain is core services, which are life-saving services. We can expand when we have additional resources but when we don’t, we prioritize the immediate intervention of the person. These cases [personal status court cases] are not only costly and lengthy, but often, the survivors start the case and then drop it, which is also another barrier. (GBV Case Worker Bekaa)*

While interviewees recognized that survivors find it difficult to engage in the justice process, they advocated for donor attention to legal representation for survivors. “According to current research, people are saying that funds should not be allocated to legal services anymore because no one is being referred to such services. In my opinion, funds should support legal services, and should work on the national level to change policy in order to have more cases enter the system and make any real change,” said INGO GBV Specialist 2. This interviewee highlighted resistance to allocating resources to legal aid, and countered this with emphasizing the need for additional funding to increase survivors’ use of legal services. Further, they mention the importance of enacting nationwide policies to improve access to justice for women survivors of SGBV in Lebanon.

### ***Socioeconomic barriers to accessing justice***

Survivors face multiple social and economic barriers when accessing justice. In fact, data from the GBVIMS demonstrates that 54% of survivors declined relevant and accessible legal services, most likely due to fears of negative consequences (GBVIMS 2016). As the INGO GBV Specialist 1 noted:

*For survivors who want to go to court, we are finding a kind of reasonable caseload to expect, because the motivation to go to court is linked to civil documentation and registering divorce, marriage, custody, or alimony. These are the top requests we get. Halfway through the process, they face social pressures from their families or because their husband threatens them or exerts influence, or because the process is taking way too long, so they get discouraged. (INGO GBV Specialist 1)*

The pressures from their families and communities have a tangible effect on the survivor’s access to immediate services, and they can also prevent survivors from pursuing long-term legal charges. According to the INGO Protection Officer, “What we often face is that you register the case for [legal] representation, but after a while, you find that [the survivor] dropped [the case]. First, it is related to the social pressure that she is a divorced woman, so they try to escape this. Second, socioeconomic factors, because in Lebanon, sustainable solutions are not available unless it is resettlement.” Within personal status courts, “it’s difficult. Not many judges are sympathetic, because there are not a lot of options after you get a divorce, for example. You need to be supported in relocating somewhere else, which is a massive issue in the country. This factor influences the decision of the survivor to not seek justice” (GBV Case Worker Bekaa). Further, there is a “lack of sustainable strategies for GBV survivors,” who leave long term intimate partners, specifically spouses, and “that’s why [case workers] have cases where after six months or one year, they want to go back to their perpetrator. This is a big gap” (INGO Protection Officer). There are many social and financial barriers to accessing justice, and it is evident that survivors lack viable long-term options, such as long-term shelters, when exiting abusive marriages.

### *Additional barriers for refugees*

Interviews with social workers and Syrian refugee survivors show that the lack of legal residency and registration has practical implications for women's rights. Refugee women in Lebanon are less likely to report SGBV if they do not have legal documentation: "For Syrians and Palestinians, it is a challenge to report to court or the police because of a lack of documentation in terms of residency" (UN Agency SGBV Specialist 1). Without requisite paperwork, Syrian refugee survivors of SGBV are unable to access justice in the form of any legal proceedings. Law 293, specifically, does not adequately protect refugee women in the face of these challenges (Moussawi and Yassin 2017, v 3). Interviews with social workers and Syrian refugee survivors show that the lack of legal residency and registration has practical implications as survivors are less likely to report domestic violence or take up legal services as doing so incurs extra costs, which NGOs are often unable to cover, potentially due to limited funding.

Lack of legal paperwork has multiple practical and legal implications: not only is their movement restricted, but their legal rights are limited, and they are often missing important paperwork – for example, birth certificates and marriage licenses. "[The] majority of Syrian refugees do not register anything and stay in camps. [There are] many cases of unregistered marriages and unregistered children. [...] They need documents and they need money," said one interviewee, a Syrian NGO Representative. Obtaining a marriage certificate or other documentation is costly and challenging. "The problem is with practices, so in terms of fees it is different in different areas in Lebanon. [...] In Akkar, it is enough for the judge if he has witnesses. In other areas, the husband and wife need to have legal residency" (INGO Protection Officer). Interviewees further noted that registration processes are not uniform, which creates difficulties for refugees. A key recommendation that emerges is to standardize procedures for refugees to obtain legal paperwork.

Interviewees also noted that many NGOs do not provide assistance for registrations for refugees. "Assistance with paper and legal documents is in high demand in the refugee community [...] But unfortunately we don't provide this service. [...] We refer them to other organizations," said a Female Social Worker Bekaa. Interviewees said a major reason for this gap in services is the cost. "NGOs are not willing to work on civil documentation because they think it is expensive," said the INGO Protection Officer. This interviewee demonstrated the link between provision of key legal services for refugee beneficiaries and a lack of funding received by NGOs.

*The current residency regime for Syrians is based on sponsorship. General Security is the institution responsible for immigration and approving or denying residence permits. Interviewees noted that*

*residency is difficult to find and to fund. Now, there are different categories. Syrian citizens who want to enter Lebanon need to decide under which category they are applying. Each category has different requirements and a different duration of time. A tourist visa is valid for two weeks; a medical visa for 48 hours; a transit visa for 48 hours; and longer periods require sponsorship, for which you need a Lebanese sponsor. This visa can last up to one year so it will become an annual thing and renewable, of course, as long as the sponsor is available and happy to take you. The category does not go into details about who needs to pay the required fee of 200\$ per year. [...] It is difficult to find sponsors. (UN Agency Refugee Specialist)*

In terms of marriage and birth registration, the rules have reportedly eased. “In 2018, the government accepted that if [Syrians] don’t have a legal stay in Lebanon, they can still get a certificate. Before that, it was a challenge for birth registration and marriage. Now, the government wants to help people get a proof of marriage, because ideally, this will help them return to Syria” (INGO Protection Officer). General Security’s new policy means that a lack of residence papers does not preclude a refugee from obtaining a marriage or birth certificate. However, in practice, refugees are unlikely and afraid to approach state institutions for legal registration, as they fear being sent back to Syria in accordance with the Lebanese Government’s policy.

Due to the low average income of Syrians, \$200 is a large amount of money to pay, and reports show that many refugees face exploitation by their sponsors. The UN Agency Refugee Specialist also added that according to new rules, Syrians are able to change their sponsor and renew their residency without incurring additional costs, which is described as a “positive thing” (UN Agency Refugee Specialist). However, experts are skeptical about the practical effect of these policy changes: “Most of the time in Lebanon, this is not being applied in practice. Legal stays are still not issued, there is also very limited capacity to process legal stays, even the ones that have been accepted. This is the major issue; the process is slow and not uniform” (INGO GBV Specialist 1).

Interviews with Syrian women refugee SGBV survivors show that the lack of legal papers presents a major hurdle:

*Now my main goal is to register my marriage and child, because when people from different nationalities marry, they need approval. I am not a legal resident here, so I need to go through a lot of procedures. (Syrian Refugee C)*

As Syrian Refugee D noted:

*I went to court [...] but because I am here illegally, I couldn’t do anything, so they referred me to an NGO [...] I also saw a lawyer independently, and he told me he would need a copy of my marriage contract in Syria. There is a new law in Syria that only the wife or husband can get a copy of the marriage contract, so my lawyer could not get it, but he got me other documents like the civil registry record and the family civil registry record. But he could not get me the marriage contract.*

Syrian Refugee D noted that initially, when she approached the personal status courts, they refused to hear her concerns due to a lack of legal residency. After accessing a lawyer, she realized that without the marriage contract, her case could not proceed. The policies in Syria also compounded her challenges. Her case shows that even when survivors take the difficult decision to pursue justice, they are faced with multiple challenges on account of not possessing legal residency and registration.

Additionally, Syrians lack trust in state actors and fear deportation, as many do not have formal paperwork such as residence permits, and marriage and birth registration certificates. Interviewees noted various forms of discrimination by state actors towards Syrian refugees:

*However, in practice, we see cases where General Security rejects the file [of a Syrian refugee]. So basically, I (the applicant) go to General Security to renew my certificate, and they tell me, "No you need to go get a sponsor." They do this for different reasons. For example, they find out that [the applicant] is working, and then they refuse to renew their stay, and ask them to get a sponsor. This is always part of our [UN Agency] problem with General Security, and we expect that this will positively change because at the start of this year, General Security issued an internal decision and a memo to stop these investigations. So previously, whenever an application is presented, General Security goes and investigates this person, including asking if [the applicant] is working. So now this investigation has stopped. They did not stop it in good faith, to be honest, but only because it is costing them money and a lot of work and time, so they decided to minimize this process. I would say that it will positively affect the refugees because now there is no way for them [General Security] to know if they are working. Previously, some General Security officers would not investigate. They would just look at the hands of the man and then they would know if he is working or not, and these are true stories, so we will see if this new decision has a positive outcome or not. (UN Agency Refugee Specialist)*

The UN Agency Refugee Specialist recounts instances of General Security acting unfairly toward refugees in cases of residence renewal, including flouting any due process rules when assessing whether the applicant is employed. Some of the investigative practices he mentions appear to be primarily based on officers' prejudice towards refugees. He states that the process has now been simplified; however, he is unsure whether this will make a practical difference to officers' attitudes.

Refugee SGBV survivors are unlikely to approach state institutions as they fear being returned to Syria, in line with Government policy. As one interviewee explained:

*In late 2018, we witnessed a drop in self-identified GBV cases. To understand this, we conducted focus group discussions with girls and women to understand this change. Results showed that people have become more careful when approaching NGOs because of the fear of forced return. They think that if they disclose something regarding their general situation, they might be forced to leave. This was one of the underlying reasons. (INGO Protection Officer)*

The drop in self-referrals coincided with the Lebanese government's policy of returning Syrian refugees back to Syria, the voluntary nature of which was questioned by human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2019). This policy, as the interviewee noted, disincentivized Syrians from approaching public authorities or legal institutions, and ultimately means that refugee survivors are unlikely to seek recourse to legal institutions when escaping SGBV.

Reportedly, Syrian refugees are increasingly unwilling to accept legal services. "When it comes to legal assistance we have seen that there has been a decline in accepting services, whether they are legal or health services. [...] I think that it is related to the process. Refugees want things [to be done] as fast as possible, and people are afraid. We see that most legal cases are paid for, for now, but in cases of survivors it is all basically based on validation and documentation, marriage certificates or birth certificates and a whole bunch of documents, which might not always be present," said the UN Agency Refugee Specialist. In his view, the unwillingness to accept legal services may be due to the lengthy nature of legal proceedings, and fear of authorities or deportation. She highlights that Syrian refugees' lack of key documentation makes it particularly difficult for them to access justice in Lebanon.

In cases where Syrian refugees do decide to pursue legal remedies, interviewees say they face multiple obstacles.

*It's about the obstacles we are facing with the Syrian refugees. Their registration cards are not always renewed, and their legal papers aren't always present. It may take a lot of time, and sometimes, it's impossible to go to the court, so we move to shelters. They cannot go to court if they don't have legal papers, or maybe they don't want to claim because some Syrian refugees come from a cultural background that gives the man the authority to beat the woman. They don't know their rights, and so they don't want to go to court. (GBV Case Worker Bekaa)*

This GBV Case Worker (Bekaa) highlights that while Syrian women may face their own cultural challenges in accepting legal representation, those who do approach legal institutions face additional challenges and lengthy legal procedures. Much of this can be attributed to the lack of legal paperwork.

Refugees also face additional costs when executing legal decisions, given that notice oftentimes has to be sent to Syria. Syrian Refugee A spoke of her own case and said: "There is no way of communicating. Even if we want to execute the decision, we would have to send it either through the embassy or by mail or through the ministry of foreign affairs, which costs a lot of money, and the organization can't cover these expenses." Interviewees noted that most NGOs do not offer financial assistance for these additional expenses that refugees incur. For refugee women, socioeconomic factors, along with a

lack of documentation and distrust of state authority, exacerbate vulnerabilities and increase barriers to accessing justice at multiple stages of the process.

## CONCLUSION

This article focuses on SGBV support and access to justice for Lebanese and Syrian survivors, which is provided by NGOs in the context of an SGBV protection and response strategy. This article argues that the present gaps in support and justice relate to the lack of long-term funding and have adverse consequences for survivors of domestic violence.

NGOs working on SGBV protection and response in Lebanon aim to provide survivor-centred, holistic services across the country. Many organizations provide services in-house, while other services require external providers that are accessible through a strong referral system. However, funding is scarce, and government support is negligible. Within the present donor-funding regime, and without alternative funding streams, NGOs are compelled to prioritise short-term programming, mirroring donor priorities, which leads to gaps in protection for survivors. Long-term services, such as legal aid and shelters, that may be able to provide survivors with sustainable solutions, are elusive. This, to some extent, makes the aims of a survivor-centred approach unattainable.

Although the importance of shelters for survivors has been established, there are a limited number of shelters operating in Lebanon. Shelters have restrictive admission criteria and accommodate survivors on a short-term basis. They appear to only accommodate cases that are relatively uncomplicated, as they do not accept women who are at high risk, have mental health concerns, or are accompanied by their children. It could be argued that this perpetuates the concept of an ideal survivor. In addition, shelters may exclude refugee survivors seemingly based on a lack of capacity. Further research is also required into the religious basis and rehabilitation practices of long-term shelters in Lebanon.

In terms of legal aid, legal representation is difficult to access for cases in personal status courts and especially for refugees in need of legal residency and paperwork. These gaps in legal assistance relate to the lack of funding provided for long-term programming, are contrary to the SGBV sector's aims, and have adverse consequences for survivors.

There is a lack of legal assistance for matters related to personal status courts, such as divorce and custody. These are the remedies that many women are seeking to make a tangible difference in their lives. Most women perceive the system as inaccessible without a lawyer, especially in the case of Syrian refugees, who perceive the legal system as untrustworthy and have further hurdles of accessing documentation from Syria without which their cases cannot proceed. For example, if a marriage occurs in Lebanon and

one party does not have legal residency papers, it is difficult to register the marriage officially, and subsequently the birth of a child; or later on, to bring a cause of action in a civil (relating to domestic violence for example) or in a personal status court (relating to divorce or custody). Procedures for legal registration are not uniform, which presents further issues for refugees, thereby creating additional barriers to access justice for refugees.

Survivors should be provided with additional assistance and support when accessing justice in cases of SGBV either through the civil or personal status courts. Survivors find the emotional and psychological support provided by NGOs as key to navigating the legal process. In addition, as lawyers cannot be hired by NGOs on a full-time basis due to Bar Association regulations, there is a risk that only a few committed lawyers are overburdened with cases related to SGBV. A recommendation that emerges is that lawyers working on domestic violence cases should have sensitization training prior to engaging with survivors to avoid the risk of re-traumatization.

Discussions need to be held within the sector on alternative funding streams, as donor funding becomes more restrictive, and the Government must be lobbied to provide financial support to survivors and fulfill their duty towards women in Lebanon.

## ***Bibliography:***

ABAAD. 2013. "Emergency Safe Sheltering Programme | Direct Services | ABAAD". Abaadmena. Org. <https://www.abaadmena.org/direct-services/safe-shelters>.

Amnesty International. 2019. "Escalating Hostility Against Syrian Refugees In Lebanon". *Amnesty.Org*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/lebanon-wave-of-hostility-exposes-hollowness-of-claims-that-syrian-refugee-returns-are-voluntary/>.

Awwad, Johnny, Ghina Ghazeeri, Anwar H. Nassar, Tony Bazi, Ahmad Fakih, Farah Fares, and Muhieddine Seoud. 2014. "Intimate Partner Violence In A Lebanese Population Attending Gynecologic Care". *Journal Of Interpersonal Violence* 29 (14): 2592-2609. doi:10.1177/0886260513520507.

Anani, G. 2013. "SYRIA CRISIS - Dimensions Of Gender-Based Violence Against Syrian Refugees In Lebanon | Forced Migration Review". *Fmreview.Org*. <http://www.fmreview.org/detention/anani>.

Bartels, Susan Andrea, Saja Michael, Luissa Vahedi, Amanda Collier, Jocelyn Kelly, Colleen Davison, Jennifer Scott, Parveen Parmar, and Petronille Geara. "SenseMaker® as a monitoring and evaluation tool to provide new insights on gender-based violence programs and services in Lebanon." *Evaluation and program planning* 77 (2019): 101715.

Barakat, Sarah. 2018. "THE COST OF JUSTICE". *Oxfamilibrary, Openrepository.Com*. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620488/rr-womens-access-to-justice-mena-040618-en.pdf;jsessionid=EF8FB7F197CE0AEEFBF55807FB43C7F2?sequence=4>.

Bartelink, Brenda Elisabeth, and Elisabet Le Roux. 2018. "Navigating State, Religion And Gender: A Case Study Of ABAAD's Gender Activism In Lebanon". *Politeia* 37 (2). doi:10.25159/0256-8845/4653.

Bartels, Susan Andrea, Saja Michael, Luissa Vahedi, Amanda Collier, Jocelyn Kelly, Colleen Davison, Jennifer Scott, Parveen Parmar, and Petronille Geara. 2019. "Sensemaker® As A Monitoring And Evaluation Tool To Provide New Insights On Gender-Based Violence Programs And Services In Lebanon". *Evaluation And Program Planning* 77: 101715. doi:10.1016/j.evalproplan.2019.101715.

Bouštani, M., Carpi, E., Gebara, H. and Mourad, Y., 2016. [online] *Scholarworks.aub.edu.lb*. [https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/bitstream/handle/10938/21211/20160927\\_10799IIED.pdf?sequence=1](https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/bitstream/handle/10938/21211/20160927_10799IIED.pdf?sequence=1).

Development Initiatives. 2019. *Field perspectives on multi-year humanitarian funding and planning: How theory has translated into practice in Jordan and Lebanon*. [online] <https://devinit.org/resources/multi-year-humanitarian-funding-planning-jordan-and-lebanon/>.

Ellard-Gray, Amy, Nicole K. Jeffrey, Melisa Choubak, and Sara E. Crann. "Finding the hidden participant: Solutions for recruiting hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 14, no. 5 (2015): 1609406915621420.

El-Masri, Roula, Claire Harvey, and Rosa Garwood. 2013. "Shifting Sands: Changing Gender Roles Among Refugees In Lebanon - Oxfam Policy & Practice". *Oxfam Policy & Practice*. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/shifting-sands-changing-gender-roles-among-refugees-in-lebanon-300408/>.

Flick, Uwe, ed. *The Sage handbook of qualitative data collection*. Sage, 2017.

Gallagher, Nancy. 2012. "Gender And Violence In The Middle East by David Ghanim". *Journal Of Women, Politics & Policy* 33 (3): 295-296. doi:10.1080/1554477x.2012.696525.

GBVIMS. 2016. "Linking Data Analysis To Programming Series: No. 4". *Gbvims.Com*. Accessed February 1 2021. [https://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Lebanon\\_Linking-Data-Analysis-to-Programming\\_Finalv7.pdf](https://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Lebanon_Linking-Data-Analysis-to-Programming_Finalv7.pdf).

Human Rights Watch. 2011. "Lebanon: Domestic Violence Law Good, But Incomplete". *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/03/lebanon-domestic-violence-law-good-incomplete>.

Holmes, Rebecca, and Dharini Bhuvanendra. 2014. "Preventing And Responding To Gender-Based Violence In Humanitarian Crises". *Assets.Publishing.Service.Gov.Uk*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089b2ed915d3cfd0003a8/GBV\\_in\\_emergencies\\_NP\\_77\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089b2ed915d3cfd0003a8/GBV_in_emergencies_NP_77_web.pdf).

Huelzer, Johanna-Maria, and Alli Divine. 2020. "Social Protection In Lebanon And Its (Non) Extension To Refugees — RESPOND". *RESPOND*. <https://respondmigration.com/blog-1/social-protection-in-lebanon-and-its-nonextension-to-refugees>.

Human Rights Watch. 2015. "Unequal And Unprotected". *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/19/unequal-and->

International Commission of Jurists. 2019. "Gender-Based Violence In Lebanon". *Icj.Org*. <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Lebanon-Gender-Violence-Publications.pdf>.

International Alert. 2017. *Justice for Stability*. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon\\_JusticeForStability\\_EN\\_2017.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lebanon_JusticeForStability_EN_2017.pdf).

International Alert. 2021. *Access to justice for Syrian refugees in Lebanon*. <https://www.international-alert.org/projects/access-justice-syrian-refugees-lebanon>.

Interagency Standing Committee. 2011. "Guidelines for Integrating GBV Interventions in Humanitarian Action". *IASC*. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Guidelines%20for%20Integrating%20GBV%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action%20IASC%202015.pdf>.

Inter Agency Standing Committee. 2017. "INTERAGENCY GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE CASE MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES". *Alnap.Org*. <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/interagency-gbv-case-management-guidelines-final-2017-low-res.pdf>.

IWSAW. 2018. Country Gender Profile - Lebanon. [online] *Iwsaw.lau.edu.lb*. Available at: <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/documents/Country%20Gender%20Profile%20Lebanon-Online%20.pdf> [Accessed 10 Sep. 2020].

Jewkes, Rachel. 2014. "Evidence Review Of The Effectiveness Of Response Mechanisms In Preventing Violence Against Women And Girls". *Assets.Publishing.Service.Gov.Uk*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/337622/evidence-review-response-mechanisms-H.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337622/evidence-review-response-mechanisms-H.pdf).

Johnsen, N. 2020. *Refugee Legal Aid in Humanitarian Operations | Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies*. <https://www.humanitarianstudies.no/2020/12/14/refugee-legal-aid-in-humanitarian-operations/>.

Kevorkian, Rita-Flora. 2016. "Mobile Sgbv Prevention And Response Services – Lebanon". *Refworld.Org*. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5a38e0ec4.pdf>.

Mansour, K., 2017. *UN Humanitarian Coordination in Lebanon: The Consequences of Excluding Syrian Actors*. Chatham-house.org. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-30-un-humanitarian-coordination-lebanon-mansour.pdf>.

Mourtada, Rima, Jennifer Schlecht, and Jocelyn DeJong. 2017. "A Qualitative Study Exploring Child Marriage Practices Among Syrian Conflict-Affected Populations In Lebanon". *Conflict And Health* 11 (S1). doi:10.1186/s13031-017-0131-z.

Moussawi, F. and Yassin, N. (2017). DISSECTING LEBANESE LAW 293 ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: ARE WOMEN PROTECTED?. [online] Website.aub.edu.lb. Available at: [https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/policy\\_memos/2016-2017/20170716\\_domestic\\_violence.pdf](https://website.aub.edu.lb/ifi/publications/Documents/policy_memos/2016-2017/20170716_domestic_violence.pdf) [Accessed 11 Sep. 2020].

Munshey, Menaal. 2018. "Access To SGBV Protection Services For Syrian And Palestinian Refugees In Lebanon". *United Nations University* [https://i.unu.edu/media/gcm.unu.edu/publication/4403/Final\\_-Menaal-Munshey\\_Policy-Report.pdf](https://i.unu.edu/media/gcm.unu.edu/publication/4403/Final_-Menaal-Munshey_Policy-Report.pdf).

Nicola J. Clarke, Martin E. H. Willis, Jemima S. Barnes, Nick Caddick, John Cromby, Hilary McDermott & Gareth Wiltshire. 2015. Analytical Pluralism in Qualitative Research: A Meta-Study, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12:2, 182-201, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2014.948980

Oxfam and AUB. 2016. "Poverty, Inequality And Social Protection In Lebanon". *Www-Cdn.Oxfam.Org*. [https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/rr-poverty-inequality-social-protection-lebanon-200116-en\\_0.pdf](https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/rr-poverty-inequality-social-protection-lebanon-200116-en_0.pdf).

Panchetti, Benedetta. 2017. "The First Ever Lebanese Non-Religious Marriage: An Ethnography from a Beirut Secular Setting." *Urbanities—Journal of Urban Ethnography* 7, no. 1: 63-78.

Roupetz, Sophie, Stephanie Garbern, Saja Michael, Harveen Bergquist, Heide Glaesmer, and Susan A. Bartels. 2020. "Continuum Of Sexual And Gender-Based Violence Risks Among Syrian Refugee Women And Girls In Lebanon". doi:10.21203/rs.2.12094/v3.

United Nations Human Rights. 2015. Ohchr.Org. [https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/women/wrgs/onepagere/sexual\\_and\\_gender-based\\_violence.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/women/wrgs/onepagere/sexual_and_gender-based_violence.pdf).

United Nations. 2015. "General Assembly". <https://www.eea.europa.eu/policy-documents/resolution-adopted-by-the-general>.

UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP). 2021. *Update of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan - (LCRP 2017-2021)*. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85374>.

UNFPA. 2018. "Gender-Related Laws, Policies and Practices in Lebanon". Lebanon. *Unfpa.Org*. [https://lebanon.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3.%20Gender%20Justice%20Report\\_Final\\_English.pdf](https://lebanon.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3.%20Gender%20Justice%20Report_Final_English.pdf).

UNDP. 2019. "UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict Fund". *Un.org*. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/report/un-action-progress-report-2018/20190531-2018-UN-Action-Annual-Progress-Report.pdf>.

UNFPA. 2020. "Lebanon Review of Essential Services". [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/lebanon\\_3-12-2020\\_signed\\_off.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/lebanon_3-12-2020_signed_off.pdf)

UN ESCWA. 2021. "Gender Justice Assessment". Accessed May 3. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/gender-justice-law-assessment-arab-states>.

UN ESCWA. 2019. "Shelters for Women Survivors of Violence". [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/shelters-arab-region-availability-accessibility-english\\_0.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/shelters-arab-region-availability-accessibility-english_0.pdf)

UNHCR and WHO. 2005. Clinical Management Of Rape For Survivors". *Unfpa.Org*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/clinical-mgtrape-2005rev1.pdf>.

UNRWA. Undated. "Palestine Refugees From Syria In Lebanon | UNRWA". *UNRWA*. Accessed February 1 2021. <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees-syria-lebanon>.

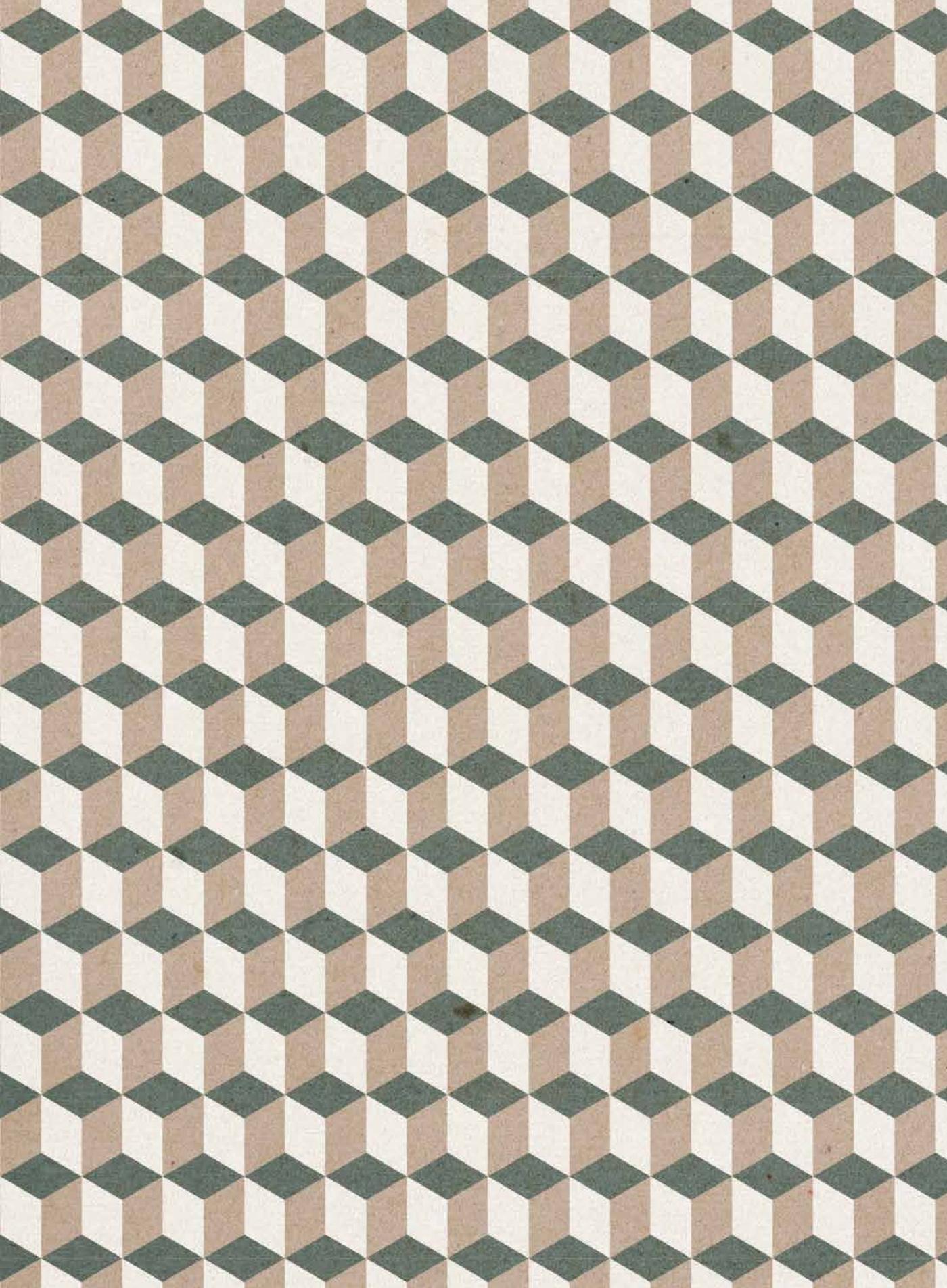
WHO. 2005. "Multi-Country Study On Women's Health And Domestic Violence Against Women". *World Health organization*. <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/24159358X/en/>.



*Gender in  
Practice:  
Strategies  
and  
Histories  
for the  
Future*

Resistance, Gender, and Identity Politics:  
A Conversation with Rasha Younes

P.106 GABRIELLA NASSIF



*Resistance,  
Gender, and  
Identity  
Politics: A  
Conversation  
with Rasha  
Younes*

GABRIELLA NASSIF

The opening seconds of the trailer for “If Not Now, When?” a video documentary about the experiences of trans and queer women during the October 2019 social movement, begins with Rana, one of the video’s subjects, reflecting on the reactions of some protesters to calls to denounce homophobia: “Some people say this issue has nothing to do with the revolution, why bring up homophobia in the revolution?” “No,” responds Rana, “there’s space for everything [...] If we don’t make our voices heard now, we won’t be able to speak up later.” This “space for everything,” according to Rasha Younes, the creative mind behind the project and an LGBT Rights Researcher for the Middle East and North Africa at Human Rights Watch, and these “specific moments in time” where you can see, in real time, a collective group of people merging and establishing connections across identity lines, is at the heart of [Younes’] own work as a feminist activist and, specifically, the pitfalls of identity politics that commonly plagues international rights movements.

*“It wasn’t that queers [in this mobilization] were saying ‘We are here, we are queer, look at us!’ [...] It wasn’t that queers are finally being visible, because they have been visible in this country for the longest time. [I]t was more this newfound, collective consciousness [...] where the realities of different groups are finally fused together in a very, very organic way, and how that became part and parcel of the protests, as opposed to saying ‘This is a protest for women’s rights’ or ‘This is a project for LGBT right.’ [This] is a departure from identity politics in its rawest state, and that’s what I wanted to show. To mainstream these ideas that identities, LGBT identities, are not separated from all these other systems of oppression that exist.”*

Focusing on the spatial politics of resistance, existence, and survival in Lebanon, Younes’ work has always foregrounded material reality, taking seriously Marxist feminist calls for a political economy framework that conceptualizes subjectivity as a product of, and a response to the various social, economic, political, and gendered pressures structuring hegemonic life. In Lebanon, this means a special focus on the political economy of sectarianism, and how sectarianism has structured access not only to public spaces, but to each other.

*“[The video project] is not about queers in Lebanon existing in the street and ‘coming out’ and dressing the way that they want to dress out in the street. This is absolutely not it. This is about the privatization of public space; this is about spatial politics, and the ways that certain bodies exist in this politics. This is about an assertion of resistance from a specific reality for individuals not only based on their queerness or their gender identity, but also based on their neighborhood, their sect, [and] their political-economic status [...] I’m saying there was a specific joining of realities that did not exist in Lebanon because of sectarianism, because of the spatial politics of sectarianism, the neighborhoods and lack of public space [...] So when people who have never met [because of these spatial politics] finally meet in the streets, it’s a revolution, it’s a revolutionary moment for the country. So that is what I was trying to document, is that time and space, that is very temporal and very euphoric, that needs to be archived [because of] the way that is challenged all of the systems [of oppression] that we understood, both about the identity politics of what it means to be queer or trans in this country, but also on special politics and economies.”*

Where “If Not Now, When?” documents the extraordinary moments of the October 2019 movement, Younes’ work more broadly focuses on the political economy of resistance, in contradistinction to the dominant conceptualization of resistance as “oppositional,” “counter-hegemonic,” and exceptional. Instead of searching for these highly-visible moments of resistance, Younes’ work – both as an activist and through their work at HRW – focuses on “what resistance means within a real-life framework, not a theoretical framework, and within a specific context.”

*“So what resistance means in Lebanon, and how it’s practiced [...] My intervention [to normative definitions of resistance] – specifically in Lebanon, where sectarianism is not only a dominant hegemony based on identity, [but] is also very much a political economy system of control – [is that] to resist that system is to detach from the political economy of sectarianism which is almost impossible, in the way that sectarianism infiltrates itself in every aspect of life and every aspect of politics and every aspect of identity [...] In order for real resistance to take place, or in order for real opposition to take place, there has to be an alternative [political] economy, there has to be a way in which people’s livelihoods do not need to depend on sectarianism in order to survive. And that’s something that is still missing [...] It’s on the ground in this context, what does it mean to separate from sectarian economy? How do we build solidarity economies and alternative economies that are sustainable within this ideological framework that we are trying to create?”*

This does not detract from the “everyday resistance [that] is practiced here in Lebanon,” including “creative or innovative ideas of ‘how do I get electricity to my house,’ or the ‘gift economy’ between neighbors.” However, sectarianism is both challenged and supported by these resistances: “sectarianism cannot survive without this, the informal cracks that feed back into the structure, strengthening [it].”

“It’s a cyclical loop, and I think approaching it from a critical lens theoretically is very important, but also how to accomplish [resistance] on the ground has to be very much grassroots, and has to be very much within these neighborhoods, and within these families [...] you can’t detach that from the reality.”

## “AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM OF RESISTANCE AND EXISTENCE”: FEMINISM IN LEBANON

Rasha Younes’ feminist politics is rooted in their lived experience.

*“Growing up in Lebanon – I don’t want to go into the identity politics of that – but my positionality and how I had to navigate different systems of oppression is what got me to my interest in this specific work [...] I think it was a combination [of moments in my life] of raw interest, lived experience, and then a really deep interest in knowledge production.”*

As an anthropologist by training and a human rights researcher, Younes similarly grounds feminism and feminist politics based on material reality and context.

*“I think feminism as a political framework is very much grounded in power, [and] power relations, and that applies to so many different contexts based on power relations between specific individuals and their positionality in a given context. So it’s not necessarily a universal claim that I am trying to make, but in that sense, I do think [feminism] is very much grounded in a political economy within which power is challenged, and individual livelihood and preservation is elevated.”*

Challenging power relations, for Younes, does not necessarily mean equality. In fact, the focus on equality alone can actually detract from the deeper and more radical social justice roots of feminism. Power relations challenge the foundations of the type of “social justice” used within the human rights framework, which posits that “all humans are equal”: absolutely not true [...] because of the systems of power relations that exist [...] this definition [of social justice] is pretty contrived, as opposed to how it could be defined by specific collectives based on their actual needs and led by them, as opposed to top-down [decision-making].” It is here that grassroots feminism in Lebanon can make a strong contribution:

*“[F]eminist collectives and individuals in this country and women in general lead this entire [social justice] movement, and are very much at the forefront of change [...] I think it’s very much a balancing of power, and a challenge of a system of oppression that has subjugated specific bodies based on their intersectional position in society, and in the economy. So for me, feminism is challenging those systems of oppressions, whether they be on the micro-level of your interaction with a father, or with a taxi driver, or with a matriarch, or your interaction with a nation, or your interaction with global politics [...] [Feminism is] very much based on power relations and challenging systems of oppression and subjugation based on an intersectional web of contextual positionality.”*

Living in Lebanon as a feminist, and doing feminist work, however, remains a challenge:

*“But [feminist work] is also this kind of burden of asking permission from multiple entities – asking permission from yourself, asking permission from your family, asking permission from the state, asking permission even from fellow “feminists” to exert any type of presence within this country; [it is] exhausting [A]nd I think the work of self-preserving and working inside, outside, and around a system of oppression is very, very valuable, and I think that’s where we need to depart from [...] I do think that most of the invisible work that is done politically in this country is by women, and all grassroots initiatives including the revolution, including any initiative that you see in this country that is in any sense nuanced, neighborhood work, even NGO work, is very much women-led. At the same time, this doesn’t translate into systems of power.”*

## GENDER AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN LEBANON

*“I think the idea of identity politics very much emerged from a need to ‘protect’ certain identities, which also comes from the rise of humanitarianism and international mechanism to protect specific vulnerable populations, which also arises from the capitalist economy within which there’s a monopolization of [...] resources. So in that sense, I think identity politics emerged as a well-intentioned, ‘we need to pay attention to different identities, and how their needs and vulnerabilities differ.”*

Identity politics can however obscure the larger context within which subjectivities are formed, resulting in a “very superficial” understanding of the relationship between identity and broader systems of power: “looking at populations not from this identity lens, but from their position within society and within an economic system.” Therefore, according to Younes, a truly feminist position would work to “detach gender and sexuality from this identity politics of ‘you belong to a certain gender,’ or ‘you belong to a certain sexual orientation’” with the aim to “understand that there’s a system of power around gender, and there are gender inequalities in this world that are also tied to superstructures like capitalism, among others.”

*“This is the approach we take in our work [at Human Rights Watch, HRW hereafter], and I very much try to broach on that within the organization, specifically on class power, in the sense that when you talk about LGBTQ populations and LGBTQ people, you cannot ever detach that from class power, especially in Lebanon, because social status and connections is what shapes your life. So for example, if you’re a trans woman who has a PhD from Paris and is living in her parents’ home, you’re probably going to be less susceptible to these systems of oppression and the kinds of daily vulnerabilities than a trans woman who has never worked, and was kicked out of her home, and has never had access to employment, and is shamed by security forces and toxic masculinity [...] So we need to focus on how LGBTQ people are specifically affected, but not necessarily just as queer or trans people: also as poor queer and trans people, or queer and trans people who already have compromised health.”*

Younes’ nuanced reflections about identity politics equally apply to HRW itself, and the broader sector of human rights work. While identity politics can be superficial and limiting, it is often “digestible for an audience” that has access to the resources which might then be redistributed to help vulnerable and marginalized communities: “Identity politics [brings] the world’s attention to a specific issue where resources are needed.” Without denying the existence of capitalist and elitist tendencies among international human rights frameworks, Younes notes that we must also pay careful attention to what such global activism can help us to achieve in relation to the “very real consequences” of macro political-economic systems have “on specific bodies and individuals” the world over, and especially in Lebanon. But, rather than depending on a universal claim about “life, identity, or justice:”

*“[W]e need to strive for some kind of actualization of social justice, but what that means needs to depart from an idea of bodily autonomy and basically, the right to bodily autonomy [...] it needs to primarily depart from [a] community’s ability to navigate space and services and everything in a safe way, and in a way that preserves their bodily autonomy, and in a way that they deem is empowering for them [...] to have the basic needs of every individual met without a struggle for survival [...] the nuance of that needs to come from a certain context, and not from a global understanding of social justice, or a global understanding of humanitarianism, because that’s precisely where we go wrong every time.”*

Toeing the line – between theory and practice, between advocacy and research, and between lived realities and universal conceptualizations of social justice – has become part and parcel of Rasha Younes’ work as both a researcher and an activist. Maintaining the “tension between this critique” of the framework of international human rights with the “need to collaborate and work within these mechanisms in order to accomplish real, tangible change on whatever micro scale that we can accomplish is very important,” notes Younes, and has made their work an honest reflection of the everyday realities of life in Lebanon as part of the LGBTQ community.

# *Body Politics and the Realities of Gender Today*

On Fatal Chaos and Disruption, and  
Women in Public Space: Cairo's Street  
Situation and the Murder of the "Maadi  
Girl" and the Single "Al Salam Doctor"

P.114 NEHAL ELMELIGY

Bodies, Space, and Remembrance

P.126 NUR TURKMANI



***On Fatal Chaos  
and Disruption,  
and Women in  
Public Space:  
Cairo's Street  
Situation and  
the Murder  
of the "Maadi  
Girl" and the  
Single "Al Salam  
Doctor"***

NEHAL ELMELIGY

On a stressful hot summer day in Cairo, Egypt, between 2012 and 2015, when I was in my early twenties and new to driving, I did not look both ways before crossing an intersection. As I hastily turned right, an old yet sturdy car thrust itself into my parents' flimsy Renault, putting me in shock and the driver into a justifiable rage. I called my mom for help, who called my uncle Ehab, known for his street wits and exceptionally diplomatic skills. He quickly came to my rescue, and in trying to get me out of paying compensation for the older man whose car I damaged, he explained: "this is a street, man, there is no telling whose fault it is." Referring to the chaos of Cairo traffic, of "the street" with its pedestrians, bicycles, vegetable stalls, and lack of stop signs or traffic lights, my uncle was saying it could have been anyone's fault because these accidents, and surprises happen; it's a street, after all. To my surprise, his argument resonated with the older man, and bystanders; I was free to go.

In this essay, I use the chaos, the unpredictability, and the potential brutality of "the street" in Cairo to reflect on two separate incidents of two Cairene women who were murdered, one in October 2020 and the second in April 2021. Even though these women did not die in car accidents, I see the street's chaos as an overflowing state of being that seeps into and represents social life in public space. To offer a larger picture of Cairo's traffic and "the street" than my accident, I use the description of David Sims (2010), economist and urban planner, which captures Cairo's bewildering and overwhelming chaos:

*[I]t is hard to find a description of Cairo, however short, which does not manage to conjure up images of near-Armageddon when it comes to traffic, and to many a casual visitor the ensnarled streets rank only second to the Pyramids of Giza as the defining impression of the city. Visitors are shocked by the erratic and seemingly suicidal driving, by the nonchalance of the meandering pedestrians, and by the seemingly perverse disregard for traffic rules. (p. 227)*

Sims draws an image of public space where everything is happening, and anything can happen. To a visitor, this scene is shocking and unpredictable, and seemingly illogical. To a native Cairene, Cairo traffic is not shocking, but it is always unpredictable and takes people's lives every day. The chaos of the Cairene street does not only manifest in traffic; it also manifests in women's everyday experiences in Cairo's public space, of which the street is both a part and a symbol.

This essay examines two spaces within Cairo's public space: the street and the apartment, specifically that of a single woman living alone. The street is part of public space because it is accessible to anyone, it has no gates or borders; what occurs on the street is visible to all. While an apartment has walls, windows and a door, a young single woman living alone defies rules of sexual respectability and social propriety and therefore is always under scrutiny and is being watched by her neighbors, doormen, landlords, and nearby

shopkeepers. Being unmarried and living alone, especially as a young woman, means she is in “danger” of having sex outside of marriage, which would bring shame and scandal onto herself, the building in which she resides, and possibly the street where the building is located.

The first murder case is of “The Maadi Girl,” a woman walking home from work at night and the second of the “Al Salam Doctor,” a woman living alone, receiving a male guest. They were both murdered, I argue, partly due to the unpredictability and fatal brutality that comes from the chaos of the Cairo street or *the Street Situation/Wad’ el Share’*. I will elaborate on this concept after I briefly sketch the events of the two murder cases.

\*\*\*

### THE MAADI GIRL

On Wednesday October 14, 2020, almost every Egyptian I know on Facebook was commenting on, or sharing a post or an article about the same incident: a 25-year-old Egyptian woman, Mariam Mohamed, was walking in the evening in Maadi (presumably one of the safest neighborhoods in Cairo), some sources report that she was returning from work, when two men in a vehicle verbally harassed her (Osman, 2020). When she talked back, they tried to steal her handbag. It’s unclear what happened next, but somehow, Mariam held onto her bag even as the men pulled it into the car (Egyptian Streets, 2020a; BBC Arabic, 2020). The two harassers kept on driving, dragging her along for a few kilometers to her death. Two of the men were arrested and sentenced to the death penalty, and the third was acquitted (Abdelhamid, 2020; Egypt Independent, 2020). I have read multiple reports and articles in English and Arabic about this murder; some say that there were three, not two, men, and that they weren’t harassing her: they were “only” trying to steal her bag, which is what was reported a few weeks after the murder (Egyptian Streets, 2020b). Even if that’s true, that they weren’t harassing her, harassment and women’s freedom of movement in Egyptian cities, and what/how some men think about and perceive them took center stage in Egyptian social media and news.

### The Al Salam Doctor

On Tuesday March 9, 2021, a 34-year-old female doctor, whose identity has not been revealed, received a male guest in her apartment where she lives alone in Al Salam District in Cairo (Egyptian Streets, 2021). The doorman reported this to the (male) landlord. Following that, a male neighbor/resident from the building and the landlord’s wife broke into the woman’s apartment, physically assaulted her, leading to her falling off her balcony from the 6th floor to her death at the foot of the building. Her body,

however, was found outside another building in the same neighborhood (Dabsh and Kara'a, 2021; Egyptian Streets, 2021; Osman, 2021). Reports claim that she was either pushed to her death or fell during the attack (Burke, 2021). The three men have been arrested, but as of now, have not been charged (Dabsh and Kara'a, 2021). The landlord has denied the murder charges, claiming the woman committed suicide because she was going through a "psychological crisis" (Dabsh and Kara'a, 2021; Egyptian Streets, 2021). This story, like Mariam's, was met with public outrage on social media and the National Women Council's (NCW) President, Maya Morsy, denounced the crime on Facebook saying that the NCW "rejects all forms of violence and thuggery" (Egyptian Streets, 2021).

\*\*\*

I return now to the lens through which I see these two murder cases, the street situation/*wad' el share'*. In his 2020 book, *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut*, Ghassan Moussawi uses the Arabic word *الوضع* /*al-wad'* (the situation) as both a description and an analytical tool to understand what happens when everyday life disruptions and violence become the norm in city life. He explains that *al-wad'*:

*[I]s a general and nebulous term, commonly used in post-civil war Lebanon to refer to the shifting conditions of instability in the country that constantly shape everyday life. It simply refers to the ways that things are, the normative ordering of things and events. However, it produces feelings of constant unease, anticipation of the unknown or what the future might bring, and daily anxieties. (p. 5)*

I use *al-wad'* as an analytical lens to highlight what I call "the situation in the street/the street situation," or *وضع الشارع* /*wad' el share'*, for women in Cairo and other Egyptian urban settings, as one that is always unpredictable and anxiety-producing. As Moussawi (2020) explains of *al-wad'*, *wad' el share'* in Cairo is also "always disruptive [...] it occurs when the out of the ordinary becomes the normal" (p. 6). The Cairene street with its near-Armageddon traffic, which I use as a building block of the concept of *wad' el share'*, is indeed disruptive to people's daily life, errands, mental health, patience, and peace of mind; it is out of the ordinary, but has become the norm.

I employ "the street" to signify public space in general, which includes the street itself. *Wad' el share'* encompasses the chaotic and potentially deadly daily and around-the-corner occurrences for women in Cairo's public space. In the ongoing *wad' el share'* women who appear to be defying patriarchal societal norms or appropriate ways of being and appearing in public space are continuously policed, disciplined, or reprimanded by strangers and onlookers who are mostly men. Within *wad' el share'* all women, it seems,

enter what resembles a parasocial interaction or relationship with the public, where onlookers give themselves the right to watch, look, judge, and interfere in a woman's life because she is publicly not abiding by normative social traditions by how she is dressing, behaving, or living.

*Wad' el share'* in Cairo is disruption incarnate. Having to face it every day, many Cairene women need and use strategies, or “practices of negotiating,” to survive (Moussawi, 2020, p. 6). Moussawi writes that al-wad' “is a way of describing queer times,” and the ways that some people are consequently forced to use “queer tactics or strategies” to survive “under such disruptive conditions.” These “queer tactics,” according to Moussawi, “gesture toward an expansive understanding of queerness – one that does not necessarily link to LGBT identities but to practices of negotiating everyday life” (2020, p. 6). What might be “normal” for some is, quite literally, a queered existence for others.

### THE MAADI GIRL AND WAD' EL SHARE'

On the street, there is always a chance of a man grabbing a woman's breasts, slapping her buttocks, pulling her hair, saying the most vulgar of things, and so much more. Mariam dying because she was walking home is out of the ordinary; but sadly, her death as a result of being a woman in the streets of Cairo is slowly becoming part of what is considered “normal.”

The following queer tactics are just a few examples of how Cairene women, myself included, consistently negotiate our everyday existence within *wad' el share'*. It starts before leaving the house: am I walking or taking a taxi? Metro or driving? I need to decide because this determines what I will wear, what time I can leave the house, and what time I can return home. Are my headphones ready? Once I'm on the street, I have to stay alert: *khaly 'eineky fe wust rasek*/keep your eyes in the middle of your head, I tell myself.<sup>1</sup> Is there a sidewalk I can walk on? Are there men on the sidewalk? Are there men sitting at the '*ahwa* (café)? Do I have time to take the longer route to avoid them? How many men are loitering by the corner kiosk today? Damn, the streetlights here are off, let me turn around. There are men in the car next to me; I should turn the music down if we both stop at the traffic light so they won't stare or make any comments. *Wad' el share'* disrupts our emotions, morale, daily flow, mobility, trust in men, future plans, and peace of mind. Even worse, *wad' el share'* can end our lives.

Many Egyptians, however, disregard *Wad' el share'* and how it harms women, and focus on what the women were doing or wearing to blame them for the harm that befalls

---

1 خلي عينيك في وسط راسك

them. A sample of this perspective is shown through Facebook posts written by two different men about Miriam that were widely circulated. In the first one (Figure 1), which was shared 1,800 times, Youssef Helal<sup>2</sup> said: “Hijab, tight pants, and make up; it’s only natural that this happened to her, young men can’t take it anymore.” In the second, which was shared 2,300 times, Muhammed Negoom<sup>3</sup> said:

*I’m not with the dogs who screwed over the decent girl [...] but the point I’m going to comment on: imagine the sister who died, may God have mercy on her, did not work and stayed dignified at home! This may be would not have happened, or at least she should not have walked home so late.*

Both men justify *wad’ el share’*, and Mariam’s murder, in different ways. Helal, in the first post, finds Mariam’s clothes and makeup provocative, even though she is wearing a hijab. His argument follows this logic: young men have pent up sexual desires; young men see a “provocative” woman; young men kill this young “provocative” woman; young woman deserves it, because she was “provoking” the men. What would he have said if she wasn’t wearing the hijab?! Negoom, in the second post, questions why any woman would have left the household to begin with. Why did she have to work? Women maintain their dignity by staying home, apparently. If she did have to leave the house, why did she have to be on the street so late? The narrative of victim-blaming remains intact no matter what.

In my experience as a native Cairene and as a researcher of women’s experiences and resistances in public space in Cairo, (many) Egyptian men consider public space to be their “universe” (Mernissi, 2003, p. 138). Some men consider women’s mere appearance in public space, or an appearance that is “too conspicuous, daring or inappropriate”—as a result of being loud, wearing attractive or revealing clothes, wearing bright colors, smoking a cigarette, being out late or after dark, or even being too tall—as an encroachment of their territory. This translates into the severe limitation of women’s freedom and mobility, and their ability to appear in public as they wish, and puts them in potential psychological and physical danger. In some Cairo neighborhoods, a woman without a hijab or who is not dressed conservatively will stand out, which may “provoke” both men and women to not only harass her, but to comment on her clothes or morality. Interestingly, women like Mariam, who wear the hijab, *still* experience verbal and physical harassment. This leads me to agree with some of the sources that reported that the harassers ended up killing Mariam because she “talked back”, not because of her presumably provocative makeup and tight pants (Egyptian Streets, 2020; Osman, 2020).

---

2 Image 1 in the Appendix

3 Image 2 in the Appendix

Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1989) writes that as a child and woman growing up and living in a southern, Black, male-dominated community, “back talk” and “talking back” to men was a courageous act of “speaking as an equal to an authority figure [...] daring to disagree [or] just having an opinion. To speak then when one was not spoken to was...an act of risk and daring” (p. 5). For hooks, talking back signals the shift of “the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side” from an object to a subject (hooks, 1989, p. 9). In other words, hooks perceives “talking back” to authority as a refusal of domination, or a challenge to the oppressor. This is exactly what Mariam did: talking back to her harassers was a daring act and a risk. It turned her from a perceived object of harassment to a resistant and vocal subject, at the cost of her life. I also see Mariam’s back talk as directed to the chaos and unpredictability of *wad’ el share’*. The chaos of the Cairene street flows between its cars, buses, Tuk Tuks, minibuses, and bicycles, and spills between the people in the street and their relationships. Perhaps, Mariam’s back talk was both an expression of resistance and frustration at the normative state of the Cairene street where everything happens, and anything can happen. It was a reaction and vocal denouncement of the disruption of the mundane activity of her returning from work. Mariam was most likely not new to it, but that does not mean she had made peace with it as a fact of public social life.

### THE AL SALAM DOCTOR AND *WAD’ EL SHARE’*

Al Salam Doctor, and all women who live alone in Cairo, especially in non-affluent neighborhoods where their social class might not protect them, “talk back” to patriarchy instead of “bargaining” with it (Kandiyoti, 1988). hooks identifies “talking back” as an act of feminist resistance that is confrontational and rebellious. Therefore, “talking back” can serve as a symbol for all conspicuous acts by women that defy patriarchal authority. As we have seen with Mariam, patriarchal authority is bound with *wad’ el share’*; in living alone as a single woman the Doctor talked back to *wad’ el share’*. Moussawi (2020) explains that *al-wad’* is constantly changing; it has no clear beginning or end (p. 6). Somewhat similarly, *wad’ el share’* is not bound by location (like the street). It exists in and encompasses all public space and materializes or goes into effect when a woman “talks back” to it, when her presence and defiance is too conspicuous.

According to Egyptian law, it is not illegal for women to rent or own apartments, live alone, or host men to whom they are not related. The Doctor was not violating Egyptian law; she was violating the normative, gendered, societal morality code. To preserve a woman’s sexual purity, which is synonymous with her honor and her family’s, most women in Egypt, regardless of religion and class, must only have sex within the institution of marriage. Living alone is an act that raises suspicion of a woman’s sexual activity, and the subsequent tainting of her honor and smearing of her family’s and neighborhood’s

reputation. While women are responsible for carrying the burden of this honor, men are the ones responsible for protecting it by controlling their female kin (mostly within their immediate family), to the extent that they sometimes kill them due to ‘real or perceived sexual misconduct’ in a crime dubbed ‘honor killing’ (Moghadam, 2003, pp. 122-123). The law is in fact complicit in this instance: judges in Egypt may decrease the sentence if a case is proven to be honor related (Khafagy, 2005). Almost all coverage of the murder of the Doctor has called it an honor killing, of a different nature though (Osman, 2021). It is uncommon, or at least not widely known, for cases where men kill (or cause the death of) women to whom they are not related for “sexual misconduct.” This makes the Doctor’s case emblematic of *wad’ el share’*.

How chaotic, how unexpected, how disruptive to have your door kicked down by fellow citizens, to whom you are not related, meaning to cause you harm because they disapprove of and are offended by something you are doing in your own home!<sup>4</sup> Maya Morsy, the NCW president and Taher Hassan,<sup>5</sup> one of the men commenting on the story on the Facebook page of Al Masry Al Youm newspaper, hit the nail on the head when they described what happened as thuggery or *baltagga*/ *بلطجة*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, thuggery means “violent behavior, especially of a criminal nature.” In Arabic *baltagga*/ *بلطجة* means “a state of chaos, vandalism and lawlessness/ acting outside the law” (Almaany.com).<sup>6</sup> As the Arabic definition shows, and to my knowledge as an Egyptian, *baltagga* can be, but does not have to be violent. So even if the perpetrators had only knocked on the Doctor’s door and asked her guest to leave, this is *baltagga*. *Baltagga* is enacted by people who take matters into their own hands and appoint themselves as the persons in charge. Their *baltagga* is as much a creator of chaos as it is a result or a byproduct of it. *Baltagga*, therefore, operates within and is an integral component of *wad’ el share’*. Within *wad’ el share’* everything happens, and anything can happen at any time. Its chaos enables patriarchal guardians, who already have socially-backed power, to assume authority over women’s lives and actions. It enables a kind of *baltagga* that is not bound to street gangs and fights, but that polices women and could suddenly punish them in line with the logics of *wad’ el share’*.

I don’t know how or why the Doctor came to live alone, and whether her family was supportive. What I do know from my experience as a native Cairene and researcher:

---

4 Under oppressive regimes, state actors do knock down citizens’ doors and arrest them unexpectedly. But the men and women implicated here are not state actors, making the case more jarring.

5 Image 3 in the Appendix.

6 حالة من الفوضى والتخريب والخروج عن القانون

just as women use queer tactics to negotiate their presence in the street, most single women who want to live alone, or live separately from their parents use queer tactics to negotiate patriarchal gate-keeping of who gets to live alone, and under what conditions. I learned from a Cairene woman I interviewed in 2017 that some women looking to rent an apartment alone use a code phrase with real estate brokers: *freedom's apartment*.<sup>7</sup> These women pay a premium to live in an apartment where the doorman, the neighbors, and the landlord will not get into their business. Essentially, these patriarchal guardians perform another form of *baltagga* by exploiting these women's desire or need to live alone and requesting a bribe to turn a blind eye to their nonnormative and conspicuous living situation. Another woman told me about several instances where she did not face a lot of difficulty renting an apartment in Cairo because she is not from Cairo and so it was understood why she is not living with her family. However, the doorman or landlord would tell her about a curfew by which she must abide and that she cannot have men visit her. As this and the Doctor's case shows us, securing a place to live alone does not guarantee that the women will be left to live as they wish. Their lives are not a private matter, they are as public as the façade of the apartment in which they live.

\*\*\*

his is a different kind of obituary—an analytical one. I mourn Mariam and the Doctor. I mourn their lost and robbed lives. I also mourn our, (some) Egyptian women's, robbed/constrained/challenged freedom of mobility, of being and living as we wish, of being conspicuous in public space. I mourn the status quo of public space. I ponder the possibility of *wad' el share'* not being the state of Cairene public space, of chaos not being its main descriptor and persevering characteristic. I don't know. I was born and raised in Cairo, and the city has only gotten bigger, more crowded, and more chaotic; the chaos has become more widespread and an ever part of its essence. With that said, in my experience, and through my research, I know Egyptian women are becoming more defiant in their occupation of public space. This essay centers Mariam's and the Doctor's murders, but it is also about why they were murdered—because they took up space that was not meant for them and appeared/lived in ways that was not approved for them. Existing within and trying to maneuver *wad' el share'* consistently disrupts, halts, and derails the lives and routines of Egyptian women. But Mariam and the Doctor, and others who behave and live like them, remind and show us that Egyptian women disrupt *wad' el share'* as much as it disrupts them.

## ***Bibliography:***

Abdelhamid, Ashraf. 2020. "Egypt: The Death Sentence to the Murderers who run over and Dragged the Maadi Girl." *Alarabiya Arabic*, November 25, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/egypt/2020/11/25/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A7->

AlMaany.com. n.d. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/arar/%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%AC%D8%A9/>

BBC Arabic. 2020. "The Maadi Girl: Mariam's murder shocks the public and provokes questions regarding women's safety in Egypt." October 15, 2020. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-54556907>

Burke, David. "Three Men Arrested as Doctor Falls to her Death in Suspected Honour Killing." *Mirror*, March 24, 2021. Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/three-men-arrested-doctor-falls-23785175>

Dabsh, Hamdi and Ibrahim Kara'a. 2021. "Details of Al Salam Doctor's Death: 'the defendants broke down her apartment's door and accused her of practicing vice (having sex).'" *Al Masry Al Youm*, March 13, 2021. Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2281314>

Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2(3): 274-290.

Egypt Independent. 2020. "Cairo Court Sentences Killers of Maadi Woman to Death." December 30, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://egyptindependent.com/cairo-court-sentences-killers-of-maadi-woman-to-death/#:~:text=In%20its%20final%20verdict%20the,One%20other%20defendant%20was%20acquitted.>

Egyptian Streets a. 2020. "Egyptian Woman Killed after being Dragged by Car." *Egyptian Streets*, October 14, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/10/14/egyptian-woman-killed-after-being-sexually-assaulted-dragged-by-car/>

Egyptian Streets b. 2020. "Two Sentenced to Death for Killing 24-year-old Maryam in Egypt's Maadi." *Egyptian Streets*, November 26, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/11/26/two-sentenced-to-death-for-killing-of-24-year-old-maryam-in-egypts-maadi/>

Egyptian Streets. 2021. "NCW Condemns the Murder of an Egyptian Woman at the Hands of her Landlord over Male Visitor." March 13, 2021. Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2021/03/13/ncw-condemns-the-murder-of-an-egyptian-woman-at-the-hands-of-her-landlord-over-male-visitor/>

hooks, bell. 1989. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. New York: Routledge.

Khafagy, Fatma. 2005. *Violence against Women: Good practices in combating and eliminating violence against women: Honour killing in Egypt*. UN Division for the Advancement of Women, Vienna, Austria.

Mernissi, Fatima. 2003. *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. London: Saqi Books.

Moussawi, Ghassan. 2020. *Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut*. Pittsburgh: Temple University Press.

Osman, Nadda. 2020. "Outcry over Egyptian Woman Harassed and Run Over by a Group of Men." *Middle East Eye*, October 15, 2020. Accessed April 3, 2021. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-woman-killed-harassed-triggers-outcry>

*Appendix:*



يوسف هلال

october 14, 2020, 3:58 pm · 🌐

...

حجاب مع بنطلون ضيق و مستحضرات تجميل طبيعي كان يحصل فيها  
كدا الشباب ضاق بهم الحال



👍❤️👍 82

9 Comments



**Muhammad Negoom**

انا مش مع الكلاب اللي بهدلوا بنت الناس ولكل  
أجل كتاب ، النقطة اللي هعقب عليها ، تخيلي لو  
الاخت اللي توفت رحمها الله مكانتش بتشتغل  
وقعدت في بيتها مكرمه ! كان ممكن جدا  
ميحصلهاش كده او عالاقل مكنتش تروح متاخر  
كده

7m Like Reply

1 🗨️

المصري اليوم

Watch Video Liked Message



**البواب أبلغ مالك العقار بوجود صديقها  
بالشقة .. قرار من النيابة في حادث  
« طبيبة السلام »**

www.almasryalyoum.com

2.4K 773 Comments 99 Shares

Like Comment Share

Most Relevant

Write a comment...

Taher Hassan  
هو اشنا في غابه البواب اتصل بيك قدامك حلول واحد تبليغ زوجها او اهلها ثانيا تتصل بالقسم  
اخيرا تجمع كل الجيران علشان يعرفوا مين اللي جوه ويشهدوا معاك لكن اللي عملتوا ده اسمه  
بلطحه وجهل

Like Reply 2w 132

50 Replies

***Bodies,  
Space, and  
Remembrance***

NUR TURKMANI

Much of how we make sense of the world is through our bodies. How they wrinkle and stretch to mark time and movement; how they flatten into stacks when numb; how they relate to and cluster around one another in celebration and mourning. This year, I thought of bodies a lot. Bodies as in being born into womanhood; bodies as in who around me is frail, who might we kill if we catch the virus; bodies as in there are human beings trapped under buildings; bodies as in limbs on limbs marching from Hamra to The Ring Bridge; bodies as in what does it mean to sit alone, isolated, in order to survive?

An odd, kinetic image comes to me when I think of Lebanon this year: our bodies sticking together like one shapeless blob of Playdough, and then spreading and thinning over time before violently separating into chunks. The coming together into a blob marks how our year started: October 2019, when we were lumped in the streets, in Riad el Solh and Sahet el Nour and Elia Square and Jal el Dib and Nabatieh and Alay and Saadnayel and Halba, familiarizing ourselves with what it means to say these streets belong to you and me, these streets are a space for negotiation, for back and forth-ing, for gendering, and for what we will make of them. The year then breaks in March – this moment of global humbling, to quote Zadie Smith (2020) – where everything we had been working towards dilutes, and we are forced to backtrack, to return to the private, the private where so much of our womanhood is silenced and controlled and contorted. And then August 4th, where we lose all sense of meaning, all sense of the body.

\*\*\*

Last year, on the 8th of March, my friends and I gathered around Mathaf for the annual International Women's Day march in Beirut. We should not have been there. The march – which, for the past couple of years, has been organized by an incredible group of intersectional feminists across Lebanon – was officially canceled. There had been over two dozen coronavirus cases in the country by then, and though we were not officially in lockdown, the potential effect the virus could have on us was becoming clearer. The wiser choice would have been to stay at home. But that morning, my group of friends, with whom I'd spent the year organizing and writing and protesting with, somehow convinced each other to go. We knew it was not right to go, but there was an urgency: a sense of youthful entitlement (what could the virus possibly do to us?) and of commitment (this matters, this really matters). Arriving at Mathaf was a reenactment of that familiar revolutionary euphoria, which had slightly wavered in the two months leading up to International Women's Day. Nadine, a feminist activist I'd been seeing in the streets for over four months, was chanting into the megaphone: "Freedom, freedom, we want freedom; the state can't dictate what we do, nor can any religious institutions,

I want freedom, freedom.”<sup>1</sup> And so, in the middle of chants and drums and laughter, we danced and laughed and marched like flamingos from Mathaf to Riad el Solh, both flaunting our existence and demanding a better world. Something about that day stands out – it felt limitless and uncontained, but grounded in love, worlds, and worlds of love. Sort of what you might imagine the last day on earth to be, if all of us were to disappear (and less than one week later, the whole world did, in a way). More than anything, it reasserted what the October 17 revolution had meant to many of us: it was feminist; it was tender; it was radical; it was joyful. Particularly, for women and other groups who have long found the streets disdainful and dangerous, that day, and many of the days that had preceded it, was a negotiation, a redrafting, of what public spaces could or ought to be.

Hannah Arendt (1958) would say that this – this coming together in the streets, this process of collective recreation – is the human gift of beginning anew. I cannot claim to be an Arendt specialist, but much of my understanding of the public space comes from her. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt conceives of politics as one based not on satisfying individual needs or agreement on shared notions, but rather, one rooted in collective and community-based deliberation. She takes her nostalgia for the Greek polis and does something with it – she argues that something about people coming together to reflect and decide upon their collective experience captures what politics and political activity should strive to be. “The polis,” she writes, “properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (198-199). The polis, then, as something transformative and transportable.

I reread Arendt now and think of the Arab Spring, and of Lebanon’s October revolution. In the early days, the revolution was a “space for appearance,” to quote Arendt again (1958), that made us more accessible to one another (204). In the months following October 17, we broke the postwar passive nostalgia and decades of political impasse to create a community of narratives and shared memories, stories. Empty spaces were occupied: abandoned theatres, parking lots, and public squares. We used them to see one another: to look at the baggage we had each hauled over the years, and to ask each other about the contents of this baggage.

---

1 Hur hur huriyye, badi 3eesh b'huriyye; mabadi sultit wazir wala sulta el dinniye

One night, after work, I went alone to one of the tents at the square and sat on a chair, quietly, listening to a lecture by an economist. I remember having no expectations – simply inhabiting a spot for the evening. After the talk, which was on corruption in the oil sector, an old man stood up, slightly shivering, and spoke into the microphone about how un-dignifying his job has been. His comment was unrelated to the lecture itself, but his urgency and affliction washed away my momentary passivity. Arendt, in a footnote of *The Human Condition*, refers to an anecdote by the philosopher Demosthenes, who comes into contact with a man telling him of his physical pain after a beating. When Demosthenes responds that the man “suffered nothing” of this, the man cries out, “I suffered nothing?” It was only when the man’s pain was clearly visible in his voice that Demosthenes was capable of compassion (Schoonheim 2019). The old man at the square told us of the long hours, the minimal pay, the lack of protection, and how he reflects on his life and thinks of it as void. How crucial it was for him to speak; how crucial for us to listen to what he had to say. A micro solidarity of sorts unfurling, like a lightweight carpet, in the middle of downtown Beirut – a plot of land which for decades has been described by the country’s residents as spectral and inaccessible.

Imagine, then, what it meant for us to see downtown as a place of pride and contestation, a place that street vendors and artists and intellectuals and “thugs” all had equal claims to. The squares across the cities and towns transformed into places where we could try to understand and address the financial crisis, climate change, labor laws, and custody rights for women. Mona Fawaz and Isabella Serhan (2020), in their piece “Urban Revolutions: Lebanon’s October 2019 Uprising,” talk about how keen activists were to “challenge privatopia,” and to reclaim previously closed-down public venues, such as the Egg, into “sites of discussion and mobilization.” Activists were also keen to reclaim private spaces, such as land lots “earmarked for development,” to reimagine and even reverse these fabricated private–public boundaries; to “embody an alternative political imaginary, one where being together is based on the shared aspirations of a life in dignity and mutual respect.” Without even trying, the protests across the cities depicted gentrification, severe class and urban segregation, the patriarchal skeleton of our streets, the infrastructure that prioritizes the real estate sector over its people, the lack of public transportation, and the deterioration or absence of public spaces. The contradictions of our cities were exposed like freckles under the sun. The public space, as we had experienced it during the protests, allowed us to think of who we are individually and what our collective tensions are – and also, how they can be transgressed or sidestepped.

What does it mean for women to dance late at night on bridges and in squares, and not at private clubs or women-only weddings – how does that shift the way we view and understand our bodies? What does it mean to say, you know what, this highway that cuts across east and west is a space for us to camp overnight, to lay down underneath a tent of

stars and to sing into the sky? What does it mean for working-class men to breakdance in the streets, to rap alongside radical feminist groups? It changes you. It changes your relationship to your city, and it changes how you flit around the public space.

As women, we experienced this process of cultural production and reclamation in an almost exponential sense. Though we have long been a part of this country's social and political fabric, the public space has for many of us been either inaccessible or crushing. Feminist protests and spaces were mostly privatized or compartmentalized, and – as is commonly the case – we feared the streets. The very system has long privatized gender issues, regulating and relegating them to our private lives through the personal status laws. But it was clear from the beginning that there is no revolution while women are second-class citizens unable to pass citizenship to their children or foreign husbands, or if women cannot decide what they do with their bodies. There is no revolution while refugees are harassed and prevented from working, and there is no revolution while migrant domestic workers have their passports taken away from them by their employers. In the streets, we stared at the patriarchy straight in the eye. Our enemy – what we wanted to bring down – was a multi-tentacled one. The very first night of protests, a woman had kicked an armed bodyguard straight in the groin. As the days went on, women became human buffers between riot police and protesters. Women led neighborhood marches, women organized meetings, and women negotiated with lawyers for the release of detainees. Though women had been organizing for decades, they still struggled with the barricades blocking their way out into the public. This revolution, then, was also about us going underneath, above, and ultimately destroying these barricades. It was about taking to the streets to say: we decide, not you. Unlike other uprisings or social movements in the region or in the country's past, we did not shy away, and our political demands were not narrow.

Arendt (1958) says that this web of human relations – that these new forms of collective action or interactions with one another in public spaces – is an artificial act, and is fundamentally symbolic, but through it we are able create new language to articulate meaning and coordinate between one another. There is something liberating about how much Arendt stresses the artificiality of public spaces and politics more generally; it is not necessarily natural for us to gather, but it is something to strive towards. The act of stepping out of our private lives and into a public space, for the sake of freedom, is for Arendt a rediscovered truth, the human capacity of rebirth. But for her, the public space is not simply a place to gather but also a space for the individual to meet the political (1963). There was one night where, in the middle of an El Rass concert in Azarieh, I got into a random argument about the Syrian regime with a teenager, who was probably not much older than 17. It started with us dancing and chanting together. Not too long after, I chanted down with the Assad regime and he paused and asked what

that had to do with anything. Our conversation evolved into an argument, but toward the end we laughed it off right before my friends dragged me out. Though I look back at that memory with laughter – my midnight feud with a random teenager – there was something incredibly meaningful and human about our interaction. There are countless stories of the sort: my queer friend who called out a protester chanting about Gebran Bassil being gay, asking, “Why is gay an insult?” Little back-and-forths daily, our city a manifestation of our bodies and the different places they belong to, the ways they make sense of and respond to one another. Here, again, this notion that Arendt propels forward in her work (1958) – the public space as one of cultural production and citizen construction/reconstruction.

Cynthia Bou Aoun (2020) writes that “the reclamation of public space took different forms: the spatial (the occupation of squares and roads); the intellectual (the use of slogans and the organization of discussion circles); the symbolic (the entry into the Grand Theatre after the construction site’s fencing was removed); the artistic (graffiti and music); and the spectacular (the human chain and the registering of the Ring Bridge as a house on Airbnb).” In that sense, the revolution – or feminism as a political movement – made use of the public space to reassert itself, whether through simply bringing individuals together; politicizing their “togetherness” through both symbolic and sociological means; or establishing the space for intellectual and political discussions.

\*\*\*

Only two days after the International Women’s Day protest, the first coronavirus-related fatality was announced and one week later, the country declared a state of medical emergency. Suddenly, after months and months of defining and negotiating our relationship with the public space, we had to return to the private. Arendt worries about a modernity that “threatens” the public space, these spaces of appearances, by reducing us into primal beings more interested in sustaining our lives than sustaining the collective. Lockdown shed light on this – this human tendency to say, “I need to protect what’s mine before anything else.” A stark shift, in comparison to what the revolution had taught us. Now, globally, forms of gathering are restricted. Proximity and the public have become a threat to our existence. Many people I spoke to said that the months in lockdown were marked by an emptiness, an abstract sense of loss. Among a myriad of things, we have also lost, it seems to me, the sense of seeing and being seen. In Lebanon, the pandemic came after months of exposure to one another. The public space we had invested in was one where we interacted with people who were not necessarily close to us – they were not simply family or friends, or those from our inner circles that we would continue to see throughout the lockdown – but more so the hundreds of people we had become acquainted with on the streets, sharing together a frayed understanding

of how we would like our country to evolve. There is something human about what protests can do: that you end up recognizing faces and characters, being drawn to each other in a way that often feels natural. It is not that I want to seek out these people today; without a sense of their bodies, I sink into a grid, or what people in Beirut often refer to in everyday lingo as “a bubble.” These peripheral connections that spurred in the months following October 17 grounded us in our city; the squares and streets and highways becoming like a local pub or communal kitchen.

I felt a familiar pang of jealousy looking at pictures of human-filled parks across the world. Research being done amid the pandemic is highlighting something we have always known but are now recognizing as key: how incredibly important public space is for our psychological and physical wellbeing, our capacity to make meaning and connect to others. This became even clearer during Lebanon’s lockdowns: a city without public spaces is not a city. The pandemic made us realize how few safe and communal spaces there are for us. An often-cited statistic is that Beirut has only 0.8m<sup>2</sup> of green spaces, though the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends at least 9m<sup>2</sup> (Nazzal and Chinder 2018). The very few parks this country has were closed during the first waves of lockdown; even the Corniche was closed off. Ironically, though there are very few public spaces in Lebanon, our economy and social structure are very much based on informal human-to-human contact. This is why the haphazard lockdown policies were heavily protested across the country, particularly in cities such as Tripoli, which are generally deprived and neglected and reliant on the stretches of streets and social contact.

The juxtaposition between our relation to our bodies and others’ during the revolution and pandemic was terrifying – the capacity of the body to be a bridge for both the brilliant and the bad. A string of questions resurfaced in this heightened isolation: who is able-bodied, who has comorbidities, who is exposed, who is lonely, who is out merging with other bodies, who is homeless? Even during the revolution, which bodies were overlooked or made invisible, their suffering deemed as irrelevant to the broader causes?

Interestingly, Arendt is read as someone averse to the body because it can limit our agency (Schoonheim 2019). She writes in *On Revolution* (1984), “The most powerful necessity of which we are aware in self-introspection is the life process which permeates our bodies and keeps them in a constant state of a change whose movements are automatic, independent of our own activities, and irresistible – i.e., of an overwhelming urgency” (59). If our bodies in the revolution felt untouchable, we were now being reminded of their fragility – bodies that transport viruses, bodies that rot, bodies that weep, bodies that feel desolated and uninhabited. In this sense, our time during the pandemic was a resistance to restraint, a pleading to be released from the body and its weaknesses.

And what of vulnerable people locked up in abusive homes, unable to escape? Nearly everywhere, there were reports of a surge in domestic violence, and curfews forcing many women to stay at home with their abusers. Feminists have long highlighted the gendered distinctions between the public and private spheres, and have equally shown how blurred (and limited) this categorical distinction is in reality (Joseph 1997; Pateman 1983). We have all been subjected, one way or another, to theories of the “domestic woman,” she who manages what happens indoors (free of charge, of course) in order for the “strong man” to manage what happens outdoors. This is what was radical and long-lasting about the globally recognized second wave of feminism: it politicized the personal, zoomed in on the home, and opened it to public scrutiny to show how violent this division can be, and how the divide between private and public makes the political process patriarchal by design.

When there is little access to the public world (be it physical or even virtual), the spaces for bargaining with the patriarchy, to quote Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), become infinitely smaller and more difficult.

But, and here is the caveat, I think our experiences in the public space, prior to the pandemic, gave us a political and local language with which to discuss our despair. There was a connection between the government’s treatment of coronavirus and the police state; there were linkages between domestic violence and personal status laws; and so on. The revolution and our feminist revolution, more specifically, “upset” the divisions between the world inside and the world outside.

\*\*\*

On the 8th of August – four days after our capital city exploded from 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate left at the Port of Beirut due to “grave mismanagement and neglect”; four days after time stopped; four days after everything we had been working towards turned to powder – we returned to the streets. If the 8th of March was about love, then the 8th of August was about anger. All of it, unrestrained and unhinged. There was this sense that they had taken everything away from us: our lives, our revolution, our hopes, our right to believe in our city. We wanted revenge.

For me, the 8th of August was about the complete disintegration of the body. I remember distinctly not having any sense or grip of my arms or legs since the 4th of August. My very being was marked by a pain and anger so blinding I could not be associated with any form of structure. Our public spaces – Martyrs’ Square and Riad el Solh and The Ring – had transformed into what looked like a war zone. We carried slogans with nooses, and we meant it: there would never be justice with any of the warlords ruling over us.

The response to our anger? More blood. Security forces shot rubber bullets and tear gas at us, as protesters threw rocks back at them. The fury cloaked the day like fog, and our pain had numbed us. Ambulances rushed in to pick up injured people, and doctors in Lebanon would announce that the force used by security forces was clearly lethal (Othman 2020). As day gave way to night, we stormed government ministries, and the standing Prime Minister called for early elections (of course, we all knew that this was futile). There had been no state for a long while, but never was it more obvious than it was at that point: it was us versus them, and anything in the middle would simply not work.

While it is common for communities to turn to each other for help and support in times of crisis, August 8th took that even further. Not only did we turn to one another for survival (because, of course, it was communities that cleaned up the streets and looked for the missing after the 4th of August, and not the state), but we also framed our anger in revolutionary terms. In her brilliant book, *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2010), Rebecca Solnit writes:

*The word revolution in Chinese is ge ming; ge – to strip away – and ming – the mandate. A revolution not only removes a regime, but also tears away its justification for governing. So, too, does a disaster: since the Chou dynasty, earthquakes in China have often been seen as signs that the rulers had lost the mandate of heaven. (151)*

By August 8th, though we had lost the right to our bodies, the disaster was all the more public because of our revolution. Not for a second did we hesitate to return to the streets, even though we were in the midst of a global pandemic, which had further entrenched the rift between the private and the public. We had come face-to-face with the truth we all know, but for some reason continue to sidestep: our fate is in each other's hands.

\*\*\*

Thinking of the body is, on the one hand, the most nonsensical of acts. We cannot think outside of it, because all that we experience is in relation to it. But at the same time, using bodily experience as a point of reference over the last year and a half has been a way to understand what exactly is at stake. The past couple of decades have been a reflection and searing critique on the notion of individualism. A lot of the pushback has been a rejection of the values that alienate us.

What strikes me most about Arendt's theory is that the public space is not a means to an end. No, the public space and political activity are an end on their own. For Arendt, political freedom goes beyond the illusion of state sovereignty. It negates the notion that the public space is a point of mediation between citizens and governments; it is, rather, a space that creates and negotiates actively, while continuously evolving, the effort "to

become human in the fullest sense.” Five years after publishing *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes in her book *On Revolution* (1963) that “revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning,” because they are intrinsically about carving out new political spaces (21).

Not too long ago, I took a walk through downtown Beirut. I was thinking of how this year, the anniversaries of the Arab Spring stepped in and out like old friends who remind us of who we once were. The sort of friends we have shared so much with, know too well, and, now, have tired of. We don't try to make them stay; we know once they leave, they take too much, so we avoid looking into their eyes. Better to look to the left. But who would we have been without these friends, where would we have strayed, who would have given us all this hope, this despair? On my walk, the streets were empty; the metal barricades back up; the security forces scattered like sticks. Undoubtedly, this is largely because of the pandemic, but in Lebanon's case, its blankness is emblematic of a past we had desperately sought to destroy. Today we are living in a country barely surviving – from economic collapse to pandemic to complete political illegitimacy and back. But something is different about the space. The graffiti, the sense of alarm it carries: the presence of our bodies have marked it like a memory that refuses to die.

The pandemic and the explosion and the revolution have reminded us, all three in different ways, how conditioned we are by our bodies, especially in relation to the spaces they occupy. We continue to revert to the same questions about the past: what about all of this is real, was the past year a lie, did we really protest, did we really break through these gender binaries, are we back to the cycle of “the revolution was all a big lie,” and if so what do we do with this information? And then on the days we can look forward at what is to come, we ask: What is the shift that will happen once we can return to the streets, what will our embittered bodies gravitate towards? My hope is that it will be toward one another.

## ***Bibliography:***

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.

Bou Aoun, Cynthia. 2020. "Reclaiming Public Space and Its Role in Producing the Revolution" *Legal Agenda*.

Joseph, Suad. 1997. "The Public/Private – The Imagined Boundary in the Imagined Nation/State/Community: The Lebanese case." *Feminist Review* 57 (73-92).

Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. "Bargaining with the Patriarchy." *Gender and Society*. 2, 3. Special Issue to Honor Jessie Bernard.

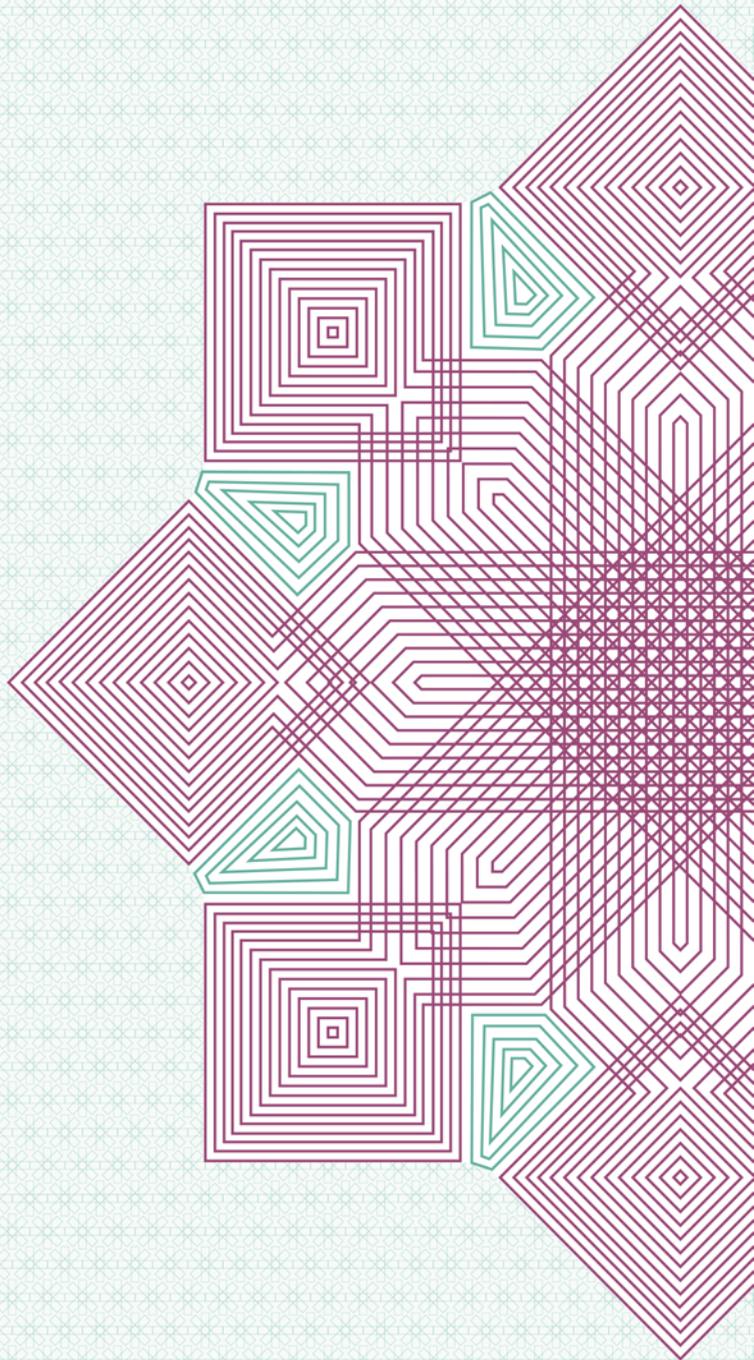
Osman, Bassam. 2020. "Weapons of Mass Destruction." *Rusted Radishes*. Beirut: American University of Beirut.

Nazzal, Maryam and Chinder, Samer. 2018. "Lebanon Cities' Public Spaces." UN-Habitat Lebanon.

Pateman, Carole. 1983. "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy." In *Public and Private in Social Life*, edited by S.I. Benn and G.F. Gaus.

Schoonheim, Liesbeth. 2019. "The Productive Body: Rereading Hannah Arendt's Critique of Corporeality and Introspection." *Philosophy Today*, 63(2).

Smith, Zadie. 2020. *Intimations: Six Essays*. London: Penguin Books.



*ISSN 2617-6025*