
Understanding Backlash in Lebanon

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I. How the Literature Defines Backlash

Backlash is defined on a continuum. A general definition frames backlash as **a response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power.** It encompasses the attitudes and actions of those who feel threatened by changes in the status quo and those who take action to secure or reinstate that status quo. The continuum starts at remedial backlash, which is defined as the reactionary, hostile reclaimer of the status quo; continues toward pre-emptive backlash, which aims to prevent changes to the status quo by constraining political parties; and finishes at misogyny, a full-blown attempt to maintain the status quo (Townsend-Bell, 2020). Despite its popularity, the concept of backlash has not been fully theorized; however, a few main features define its different forms. One such feature is **the desire by some proponents of backlash to return to aspects of an idealized past in which structural inequality was normalized.** Another main feature is also **an explicit hostility to feminism, either because gender equality is not a desirable goal, or because feminism works against equality by privileging women over men** (Jordan, 2016). Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames (2008) argue that partisans of backlash do not reject all change, but instead selectively label some change as going too far while validating others.

Literature on women's participation in politics and civil society indicates that violence against women which occurs in response to that participation can also be categorized as *backlash*. Backlash is thus defined as one of several orientations toward feminism, and at least two additional orientations exist: **Entrenched opposition** and **maintenance of the status quo** (Sen et al., 2017). Under the umbrella term of backlash, definitions distinguish **resistance** from *opposition*, and **structural obstacles** from *misogyny*. Scholars tend to reserve the term *resistance* for action in support of feminist goals and propose that action against feminist goals is termed opposition (Piscopo, 2017). **Opposition** to feminist goals is distinct from *structural obstacles* and from actions that inadvertently undermine these goals without a clear intention to. **Opposition** is defined by deliberate action, including words, behaviors, and symbols, by individuals, groups, or institutions to limit feminist goals. It can involve physical violence, intimidation, marginalization, and procedural roadblocks, and its intended purpose is to contain or reverse feminist goals (Sen et al., 2017). While opposition intends to reverse feminist goals, the purpose of **resistance—when it's not used to denote action supporting feminist goals**—is the maintenance or reinforcement of gender inequalities. Resistance is a subset of the many practices and processes which sustain gender inequality, and is defined by opposition, challenge, or pushback against efforts to build gender equality. Mainstream literature also identifies *misogyny* as another form of backlash. Both misogyny and backlash are organized around power that is structured through social hierarchies.

While these nuanced definitions hold true and apply in multiple contexts in the West, and even in the South in several instances, they remain fundamentally incompatible with the violence and exclusion that women in Lebanon face. Though there are clear instances of resistance, opposition, misogyny, and structural obstacles in Lebanon, the fundamental threat or backlash to women's rights and gender justice is viciously built into the system. It is beyond a reaction to a gain. In contrast to mainstream literature that defines backlash mostly as a violent or hostile *reaction or response* to progress made within or by the women's movement, the hostility experienced by women in

Lebanon cannot be confined to a response and cannot be adequately framed as such. It is rather structural – embedded in the very systems that make up families, communities, and the state, and is pervasive, thus permeating all spheres.

II. Lebanon: Background & Context

In 1916, following centuries of Ottoman rule, a French-British agreement (Sykes-Picot) delineated Lebanon's borders without much consideration to significant segments of its citizens' wills, distributing power among its different confessional groups and creating Lebanon as a consociational democracy. A consociational democracy is "a power-sharing system where various ethnic or religious or other political groups are equally incorporated into positions of political power with the goal to maintain peace and stability" (Jabbara & Jabbara, 2002). Lebanon is a constitutional republic with an elected representative parliament and a constitutionally independent judiciary. The constitution mandates the partition of power in public offices, parliament, and government on a confessional basis among the four major sects: Maronite Christians, Sunnis, Shiites, and Druze.¹

Further, the Lebanese constitution allows the different sectarian communities to build their own educational systems and schools. Sects are also permitted to handle their respective communities' personal status issues, and hence to establish their own religious courts. However, the constitution does not mandate that sectarian communities exclusively manage these two functions—education and personal status—for all Lebanese. Therefore, the Lebanese state proceeded to construct its own educational system alongside the sectarian schooling systems. Conversely, by relegating family and personal matters to religious courts and abstaining from establishing civil courts for family and personal matters, the state renounced its constitutional right (and obligation) to institute public family laws.

In parliament, a 50:50 ratio secures an equal division of seats among Muslims and Christians. This system is preserved and maintained by political elites who earn their legitimacy through parliamentary election laws built to maintain this system, and through the validation of religious authorities. This creates a multi-layered political system, a sectarian consociationalism that reproduces traditional patriarchy.

Over a decade after the establishment of the Lebanese republic in 1943, multiple wars erupted starting in 1958.² 1975 marked the beginning of the civil wars that would engulf

¹ Article 95 of the Constitution states that "The Chamber of Deputies that is elected on the basis of equality between Muslims and Christians shall take the appropriate measures to bring about the abolition of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan. A National Committee shall be formed and shall be headed by the President of the Republic; it includes, in addition to the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the Prime Minister, leading political intellectual and social figures. The task of this Committee shall be study and propose the means to ensure the abolition of confessionalism, propose them to the Chamber of Deputies and the Council of Ministers, and to follow up the execution of the transitional plan. During the transitional phase: a. The sectarian groups shall be represented in a just and equitable manner in the formation of the Cabinet. b. The principle of confessional representation in public service jobs, in the judiciary, in the military and security institutions, and in public and mixed agencies shall be cancelled in accordance with the requirements of national reconciliation; they shall be replaced by the principle of expertise and competence. However, Grade One posts and their equivalents shall be except from this rule, and the posts shall be distributed equally between Christians and Muslims without reserving any particular job for any sectarian group but rather applying the principles of expertise and competence". This article has not been implemented to this date.

² These include the following: The 1958 internal clashes between the pro-US Chamoun/Christian camp and the Pro-Arab Nationalist/Muslim Camp which was influenced by the heightened Arab Israeli conflict; the 15-year Lebanese civil war; the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000; the 2006 Israeli war; the 2007 clashes between the Lebanese

the country for a decade and a half and that would further entrench sectarian divides. The civil war paved the way for warlords—heads of the traditional political families, as well as leaders of newly formed militias—to come to power by tightening their grip over power, resources, and key governmental positions. The war robbed citizens and residents of their childhood, homes, loved ones, and educational and professional prospects, rendered hundreds of thousands destitute, and forced thousands to brave the sea seeking safety for them and their families outside of the country. The civil war officially ended when warring factions congregated in the Saudi city of Taif and signed a National Reconciliation Accord in 1989. The Lebanese thus took a breath and welcomed a permanent, yet shaky cease-fire.³

The Taif Agreement might have been a welcome change at the time, but it certainly was not a guarantee of a true reconciliation. In March 1991, the Lebanese parliament passed an amnesty law⁴ that pardoned all militias and political groups for the crimes committed prior to its enactment. The enactment of this law was the onset of an era of foreign military occupation, a series of political assassinations, sporadic explosions, intermittent stretches of political deadlock, corruption, and most recently, mass uprisings, economic crises, and severe devaluation of the national currency against the U.S. Dollar.

For the past four decades, Lebanon had been ruled by what Rima Majed (2022) calls “sectarian neo-liberalism”: A hybridity of sectarianism and an increasingly pronounced neo-liberalism. This peculiar mix was maintained by an unaccountable political oligarchy with undisputed powers. Warlords-turned-governors morphed citizen-state relationships into patron-client dynamics with basic rights and services dispensed in exchange of political loyalty. This ensured that citizens remain locked within the bounds of their sects (Salloukh et al., 2015). The country’s vulnerabilities culminated in the tragic explosion in Beirut’s port on August 4, 2020, that claimed the lives of more than 200 victims, injured approximately 5,000 others, and left nearly 300,000 homeless. The explosion delivered the deathblow to the last remaining functional bits of the social, economic, and political infrastructure in Lebanon. The country was already facing a twin crisis: A public health catastrophe due to the unforeseen magnitude and governmental mismanagement of COVID-19 and an economic collapse ranked by the World Bank among the top three most severe economic collapses worldwide since the 1850s (World Bank Group, 2021).

III. Oppressive Patriarchal Structures

While perceived as enjoying a better status than their sisters in other Arab countries, women in Lebanon have consistently been the most severely hit and marginalized by these overlapping crises. They not only bear the brunt of care work in their families, but also live under a complex patriarchal legislative, social, and political system that discriminates against them in personal status courts, access to services and protection, labor and citizenship laws, and political participation. Women in Lebanon make up only

Army and Fateh Al-Islam; the 2008 internal clashes between the pro-US camp – mainly Sunni parties, a few Christian parties, and a major Druze party – and the Hezbollah camp; the 2013 battles between the Lebanese Army and Islamic extremists led by Ahmad Al Assir; and finally, recurrent clashes in Tripoli, north of Lebanon, between 2011 and 2015.

³ The National Reconciliation Accord was signed on the 22nd of October 1989 and was ratified by the Lebanese parliament on the 5th of November 1989. It is also known as the Taif Agreement.

⁴ The law grants “a general amnesty for crimes committed before March 28, 1991, with some exceptions.”

22% of the labor force in comparison to men, who make up 66% (Central Administration of Statistics, 2022). In the public sector, women constitute a little under 50% of the employees, while only 21% hold executive first-degree positions (LADE, 2021). This is partly because the neoliberal character of the state and market in Lebanon shifted the cost of women's economic participation to women and their families by refraining from providing any aid or state subsidy. Hence, women have been forced to shoulder the increasing costs of childcare, health insurance, and transportation. This discrepancy also pervades the political realm. It manifests primarily in the scandalous absence of women in both the municipal councils and parliament,⁵ and in the absence of a women's quota in the country's electoral law.

Despite being among the first Arab countries to grant women the right to vote and run for elections in 1953, Lebanon had not seen any women in parliament before 1963, when only one woman, the daughter of a late MP, was elected.⁶ The country maintained a low percentage of women in all six parliaments since 1963 (the number of women has ranged from three to eight). In 2022, eight women were elected to parliament (the highest number Lebanon has seen).⁷ Though legislation does not actively prevent

⁵ Women form less than 6% of municipal councils - last elected in 2016; and less than 8% of the parliament – last elected in May 2022.

⁶ Mirna Boustani, daughter of late Emile Boustani, was the first woman to win a seat in parliament taking over her father's seat after his death in 1963.

⁷ In the parliamentary elections of 1963, Mirna Boustani was the first woman to win a seat in parliament; in the parliamentary elections of 1991, Nayla Moawad – wife of late president Renee Moawad who was assassinated in 1989 – was the only woman to enter parliament for the Maronite seat in the Zgharta district (North Lebanon); in the parliamentary elections of 1992, two of the three women who won were closely connected to strong political figures -husbands such as Nayla Moawad, or brothers such as Bahia Hariri, sister of then Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri. The third candidate who won in the 1992 round was Maha ElKhoury Assad, who was not linked to any male political figure, and who won a Maronite seat in the predominantly Christian district of Byblos, with 41 votes only, as a result of the Christian boycott of the 1992 elections. The 1996 parliamentary round yielded a similar output with three women entering parliament- Nayla Moawad and Bahia Hariri who maintained their seats, and Nouhad Souaid – wife of late Antoine Souaid who died shortly after winning his parlimanetary seat in Byblos in 1964. The 1996 parliamentary round was the third time Souaid runs for a seat. The 2000 parliamentary elections saw Nayla Moawad and Bahia Hariri maintaining their seats again, and the advent of young Ghinwa Jalloul, who ran on Rafik Al-Hariri's list in Beirut in the capital Beirut, and who was the first and only woman - outside of his immediate family - running on his list. The 2005 parliamentary round, the first after the assassination of PM Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon, resulted in 6 women MPs, the highest number of women in parliament until then. While Bahia Hariri, Nayla Moawad, and Ghinwa Jalloul maintained their seats, the 2005 parliamentary round featured 3 new entrants – all of whom linked to male political figures: Gilberte Zouein, daughter of Maurice Zouein, late MP and minister, won the Maronite seat in Kesrouane; Settrida Geagea, wife of Samir Geagea - leader of the right-wing, Christian, militia-turned-party "Lebanese Forces" – won the Maronite seat in Bsharre (North Lebanon); Solange Gemayel, wife of Bashir Gemayel – elected president of the Lebanese republic in 1982, but assassinated less than a month after, won the Maronite seat in Beirut but later left that spot in the 2009 elections in favor of her son Nadim. In the 2009 parlimanetary elections, the number of women in parliament dropped to four – three of whom maintained the seats they won in previous elections (Bahia Hariri, Gilberte Zouein, and Settrida Geagea), and one new entrant – Nayla Tueini - daughter of Gebran Tueini, journalist, former editor and publisher of prominent Lebanese daily AnNahar, and politician assassinated months after being elected MP in 2005, and granddaughter of veteran journalist and former minister and MP Ghassan Tueini. The 2018 parliamentary elections increased the number of women entering parliament to 6, with two retaining their seats (Bahia Hariri and Settrida Geagea), and four new entrants who, while not having any familial links to any male politicians, were mostly appointed by respective political parties' leaders on their list: Inaya Ezzedine, who was fielded by the president of the Amal movement, Nabih Berri, on the movement's list in the South, won the Shiite seat in Tyr; Dima Jamali and Roula Tabsh Jaroudi, who were chosen by leader of the Sunni "Future Movement" on the party's lists, won the Sunni seats in Tripoli and Beirut respectively. The only exception was journalist Paula Yaacoubian who, despite having served as a long-standing journalist for the Future Movement's broadcast station, ran with the independent lists, and won the Armenian seat in Beirut. The 2022 parliamentary elections marked a shift in the traditional political/electoral paradigm in the country, with 3 independent women "change MPs" entering parliament: Halime Kaakour, Najat Aoun, Cynthia Zarazeer; alongside Paula Yaacoubian, Settrida Geagea, and Inaya Ezzedin who retained their seats;

women from participating in politics, traditions, customs, and informal societal rules and norms still stand in their way, as reflected in Lebanon's ranking of 149 out of 152 on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index for political empowerment.⁸

The low participation of women in politics and in the formal labor force is a symptom of structural flaws in the very way society is constructed, and in power relations within familial structures. These flaws include **a sectarian governance system, the grip of religious institutions on personal status laws, and the patrilineal citizenship and kinship system prevalent in all spheres of life (families, the market, and governmental institutions)**. These flaws are, in turn, indications of an ambivalent and contradictory relationship that women in Lebanon have with their state. While women are full citizens by law with political rights such as the right to vote, they are also "pseudo-citizens" (El-Masry et al., 2018). By relegating personal status matters to sectarian courts, who are notorious for upholding patriarchal biases, the Lebanese state abstains from assuming its full responsibility towards women. The following section will discuss each of these oppressive structures: **Personal status laws, citizenship, census registration, and the penal code.**

➤ **Personal Status Laws**

There are eighteen officially recognized religious sects and fifteen different personal status laws in Lebanon, governing marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony and inheritance.⁹ Not only do these laws enshrine the privilege of men over women in several issues, but they also differentiate among women of different sects, stripping them of their ability to make unified claims to authorities (Mikdashi, 2022).

Instead of offering a civil alternative to its citizens, the Lebanese state elevated sectarian family law to public law, thus legalizing the preferential treatment of men.¹⁰ Resultantly, this created non-homogeneous legal conditions for its citizens, threw family matters into the domain of the sacred, given its religious affiliation, and effectively created a nation of sub-national patriarchal communities defined by religious law (Mikdashi, 2022; Traboulsi, 2018). While sectarian control over personal status and family issues affects all Lebanese citizens, it disproportionately affects women. Personal status laws and sectarian rule holds women back in the domestic sphere and impedes their initiatives in the public and political spheres, thus exemplifying the Lebanese patriarchal system's grip over women's lives.

While the personal status laws might be the primary mechanism of legal recognition devised by the state for separate sectarian groups, sect is not the citizens' only register of recognition in Lebanon.

and two MPs Nada Boustany and Ghada Ayoub representing traditional political parties – the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Lebanese Forces respectively. This raised the number of women MPs to 8, the highest in the history of the Lebanese parliament.

⁸ The Global Gender Gap Index is a composite measure that assesses gender gaps in the following four dimensions: Economic participation and opportunity; education attainment; health and survival; political empowerment. Each dimension has its own rank, and all four dimensions result in average ranking for the country. Each dimension has a breakdown to other indicators that are being measured and provide a basis for the average ranking of every dimension. See World Economic Forum (2020). *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

⁹ Inheritance is exceptional in that all sects in Lebanon abide by a civil law that governs inheritance, except for the Muslim communities who abide by the respective sectarian personal status laws.

¹⁰ Despite variations between Muslim and Christian legal codes, the common pattern is a patriarchal bias.

➤ Sextarian Citizenship

Citizenship in Lebanon is differentiated through two registers of recognition: Sex and sect. This means that an abstract mass of Lebanese citizens practically does not exist; laws that apply to men citizens do not apply to women; and sectarian communities are governed by separate legal apparatuses (Mikdashi, 2018). Sex-based differentiation saturates most branches of Lebanese law and along with sect and gender, determines which practices of citizenship are available and which are foreclosed. Maya Mikdashi (2018) uses the term “sextarianism” as a framework for thinking about the ways that sex and sect organize social and political life in Lebanon, arguing that “sect and sex are mutually constitutive modes of political difference in Lebanon,” where “state effect” and Lebanese sovereignty itself emerges from the management of these modes of political difference” (Mikdashi, 2018).¹¹

Citizenship is exclusively patrilineal and is not passed from a Lebanese woman to her spouse or children. It was not until 1960 that Lebanese women had the right to retain their citizenships when married to a non-citizen. Further, it took Lebanon 18 years after the adoption of the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1978 to finally sign it with reservations. These reservations were tied to clauses that called for equality between men and women to acquire, change, or retain their nationality and pass it on to their children, and those calling for the elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations. “Even a woman who occupies the most privileged political, social, and economic positions cannot practice a right that every Lebanese male citizen takes for granted, such as passing her citizenship to her children” (Mikdashi, 2018).

➤ Patrilineal Census Registration

Census registration is an example of the primary role of family within the Lebanese patriarchal political system. The state issues three official documents to citizens: A national identification card, a passport, and a census document (*ikhraj qayd*); all three of which interchangeable for most bureaucratic procedures, but the most crucial of which is the census document because “it is impossible to receive or renew the national identification card or the passport without producing a new census document” (Mikdashi, 2018).

In her article “Sextarianism: Notes on Studying the Lebanese State”, Maya Mikdashi (2018) discusses how census data and documents are organized.

Citizens are disaggregated according to sect and placed as extended patriarchal families into separate folders, and it’s on the basis of this shared sectarian folder that extended patriarchal family serial numbers are issued. Census documents are organized by family, so individuals from the same extended patriarchal family carry the same registration number. Citizens, both male and female, are registered in local census offices according to the following organization metrics: **Region of origin¹², kinship and/or marital status, sect/personal**

¹¹ See Mikdashi, M. (2022). *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon*. Stanford University Press.

¹² The region of origin is identified as the place of birth of the male ancestor at the time of the last official census in 1932.

status, and sex. These four metrics determine which folder an individual's census information is placed in, and importantly, the mechanisms for this information to change in relation to various life events such as religious conversion, marriage, birth, death, or divorce. (Mikdashi, 2018).

Though the same four metrics organize both male and female citizens, it is only one – sex – that determines how this data is recorded in state registries (ibid). So:

[B]ecause serial numbers are distributed on the bases of extended patriarchal families, female citizens cannot be considered heads of families. They are either recorded as daughters to their fathers or wives of their husbands. When a female citizen gets married, she is removed from her family serial number and added to that of her husband¹³. Women thus can only be added or subtracted from these patriarchally-organized databases of extended families, but they cannot be non-patriarchally incorporated individuals” (Mikdashi, 2018).

When a female citizen is married, she automatically adopts her husband's serial number and thus inherits his local district and sect,¹⁴ and is counted as being “from” his region (Moawad, 2016), and hence votes in that region (Mikdashi, 2018). The couple's children are automatically incorporated into the serial number of their father if and when he converts, irrespective of whether or not they want to, while their mother's conversion has no legal effect on them (Mikdashi, 2014).

Female citizens are thus registered and quantified in relation to male citizens, as wives or daughters, while male citizens form the nodal points around which legal, bureaucratic, and kinship relations develop, extend, and contract (Mikdashi, 2018).

Both citizenship and membership in a sect, even families, are inherited through male lineage. It is granted to individuals through their paternal lineage and is preserved exclusively along this line. This configuration reveals the image of women in the Lebanese legislator's psyche as mere appendages of men, with limited agency and ability to be legal guardians of their children, and to develop their own political clout in their own districts if they choose to.

➤ **Penal Code**

Sex-based differentiation not only saturates civil law, but it is also salient in the penal code (Mikdashi, 2011). Patriarchal biases remain evident despite hard-earned changes that feminist and women's groups advocated for in the last decade.

For decades, the notion of “honour” imbued the essence of the Lebanese criminal law, which grants lesser punishment for crimes committed “in a state of anger”¹⁵ to this day. While being extremely broad, the law was mainly used to reduce punishments of “honour crimes” perpetrators. Further, until 2011, the Lebanese criminal law boasted

¹³ This procedure is optionally reversed in case of divorce. It is only reversed in cases of divorce, if the woman asks for it to be reversed. A husband may not force his ex-wife to do so.

¹⁴ Both male and female citizens may change their region and vote in a different one following an official request from the Ministry of Interior, but this remains optional while the addition of women to their husband's registry is obligatory by law.

¹⁵ Article 252 of the penal code grants mitigating excuse “to the perpetrator of an offence who acted under the influence of violent anger provoked by an unjust and sufficiently serious action by the victim”. It is known as the “provocation excuse.”

an “honour crime clause” (Article 256) that explicitly granted “he who injures or murders his wife, ascendant, descendant, or sister after catching her in an act of adultery or an illegitimate sexual act” a lesser sentence. In contrast, women who kill their husbands for similar reasons do not benefit from any mitigating circumstances. However, persistent, decades-long feminist lobbying resulted in the repeal of several laws that upheld misogyny and protected perpetrators of crimes against women, notably Article 256 in 2011 and later in 2017, Article 522.¹⁶

Discrimination against women in criminal law was not limited to protecting men who kill female relatives. Penal code articles governing rape as well as the domestic violence law (passed as late as 2014) explicitly exclude marital rape from punishment, unless it entails severe physical violence and leaves visible marks that can be used as evidence. Noteworthy is the receding prevalence of “honor killing” perpetrated by kin, notably brothers and fathers, in the past few years, compared to the sharp hike in crimes where men kill their wives even if the husband’s publicly disclosed motive was “honor” (Baydoun, 2011).

IV. Theoretical Framework Connectivity and the Multiple Spheres

To make sense of the above, Suad Joseph (1993, 2005 & 2011) theorized and discussed at length some of the notions that underlie the Lebanese patriarchal power matrix, and the Lebanese state-building project. Three notions are especially key to understanding the Lebanese state: **Patriarchal connectivity**, the **kin contract**, and **political familism** (Joseph, 1993 & 2011).

Patriarchal connectivity, Joseph contends, is a cornerstone of Lebanese political and social life. It has its roots in connective selfhood (Joseph, 1993). **Connective selfhood** describes:

The fluid construct of self among Arab families which is defined in relation to others and considers intimate others as extensions of the self. It refers to a culturally normative pattern of male and female relationships in Arab families that centers familial relations over the individual (Joseph, 1993).

Connective selfhood also links kin and non-kin dynamics. Although modelled in and by familial relationships, **connectivity** extends across significant connections and relationships in Lebanese society via idiomatic kinship, so non-kin persons can evoke the legitimacy and expectations of kin relationships in all spheres. “Coupled with patriarchy, connectivity organizes selves with fluid boundaries in a gendered and aged hierarchy, in a culture that valorizes kin idioms in all relations” (Joseph, 1993). Because of this family-embedded patriarchy, Joseph argues,

Men and elders are entitled to direct the lives of women and juniors; are authorized to regulate and supervise women and juniors; and have legally recognized rights and responsibilities in relation to them.

Resultantly, kin groups and extended families are recognized as legitimate political actors in Lebanon. Under a frail state, kin became the “anchor of security for Lebanese citizens who use idiomatic kinship in all realms of life to access resources in the market,

¹⁶ An article in the penal code that spares rapists punishment if they marry their victims.

the workplace, and in politics” (Joseph, 1997). This structure has given rise to the “**kin contract**” (Joseph, 2005). The kin contract is:

The formal and informal understanding that membership in families precedes and pre-empts membership in the state, and that families can legitimately claim prior loyalty of their members, over and above the state’s claims to loyalty. State actors, political leaders, and militias thus turned to families to mobilize and organize the population. They mobilized their own kin and deferred to kin in matters of relevance to the state and the law. In this configuration, the political leader is understood as a family member, an honorary family patriarch. This has paved the way for all leaders to present themselves as the senior patriarchs of the extended political family, calling for loyalty, deference, and service owed to them as heads of families (Joseph, 2005).

This arrangement has multiple consequences: It validates patriarchal extended kinship as a venue of social and political control, which serves as the most significant deterrent to Lebanese women’s positioning as full citizens; it confirms the state’s legitimation of the primacy of kin; and justifies the state’s mobilization of religion to sanctify extended kinship. Joseph (2005) argues that the kin contract is based on the **care/control paradigm**. Members receive care from the extended kin but have to accept the presumptions of patriarchal control in return. It is the care/control paradigm that “energizes” the kin contract (Joseph, 2005).

This partly explains why most political parties in Lebanon are most often based in family allegiances, and why and how political leadership continues through familial lines, usually passed down from father to son and occasionally to wives or daughters. In the last four decades, women in Lebanon have stepped into political positions either after their husbands’ death, or in support of their brothers, or while waiting for their sons to mature. This is how **political familism** developed. Political familism is:

The deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms, practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their demands to the state, and the use of kin idioms by state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship and public discourse that privileges family. Political leaders assimilate kinship into their political practices, treating the state as a source of resources to extend to kin and kin-like connections, privileging males and elders over females and juniors in the distribution of resources. They not only distribute state resources in function of their friendships and connections, but also often defer to family heads in matters related to members of their families, reproducing kinship by calling upon their own kin for political support. Such deference is further reinforced by religious authorities who continually reference family and kinship and elevate kin to the level of the sacred (Joseph, 2005).

The privileges bestowed upon males and elders, justified in kin moralities and sanctified by religion, have always been a constant feature of the social and political arenas in Lebanon: “Elites distributed resources on the basis of relationships often grounded in real or idiomatic kinship, subsidizing the control of males and elders over females and juniors in the family” (Joseph, 2011).

Joseph’s patriarchal connectivity-kin contract-political familism trilogy, which center family in political dynamics and tensions in Lebanon, is instrumental in unpacking

Lebanon's political puzzle. However, allegiance to kin alone might not always give the most accurate depiction of Lebanon's complex and nuanced political fabric. Though an implicit, and almost instinctive, understanding of the primacy of kin over the state has long been established among the Lebanese, the last two decades have seen intense competition between kin and sectarian actors, poorly disguised as political parties, over loyalty and clout.

A sound example of this is the electoral behaviour of the Shiite community over the past two decades. Tensions between prominent families and dominant Shiite political parties, Hezbollah¹⁷ and the Amal movement—dubbed the “Shiite Duo”—have been rampant and pronounced. In most districts of South Lebanon, where the Duo's presence is most strongly visible and felt, prevailing feudal political dynasties—namely Asaad, Khalil, Zein, and Osseiran—failed to survive the rise of the Duo in the past decade at least. While they end up securing most of the parliamentary seats in the area, the Duo still reserves a seat for a progeny of one of the dynasties, as long as he—never she—remains under their control.

The rise of different political actors is not the only factor complicating the picture. The October 2019 uprising also contributed significantly to the destabilization of the political status quo. The revolutionary wave that took the country by storm in 2019 introduced novel approaches to political practice in the country and encouraged electoral behaviour that transcends both the family and the sect, particularly among the youth. It is worth noting that the primacy of kin in political behaviour varies across the different sectarian and political groups. However, research about these variations remains to be conducted.

It can be safely argued that political familism and the ensuing male domination of political space has been a primary mode of operation within the Lebanese system since the inception of the state. It defines the country's political practice to this day, though in varying degrees. Not only do safe spaces for women, particularly feminists, to practice politics hardly exist in the country despite feminist efforts, this reality has also been normalized (El Rahi, 2022).

This **family-based patriarchy** penetrates the state in Lebanon, and thus, **destabilizes** the liberal political theory of the **public/private binary** dominant in many Western societies, rendering it obsolete in the Lebanese context (Joseph, 1997). Several scholars have suggested alternative paradigms to more accurately capture different contexts. Nira Yuval Davis (1997) suggested one such paradigm, composed of three domains: The state, civil society, and family. Joseph (1997) also put forward a similar suggestion of a model with multiple overlapping spheres specific to the Lebanese context. She identifies these spheres as the governmental and non-governmental (which she uses to avoid the pitfalls of the assumptions embedded in Western-centric civil society theory), and the domestic (which she uses to include kinship and other household arrangements that flow beyond the family unit).

This multiple spheres model better fits and explains the Lebanese context than the public/private binary. Joseph suggests that, in the Lebanese context, the separation of the public and the private is only imagined. In reality, the public and private bleed into

¹⁷ A political party and armed resistance group explicitly backed by Iran, with considerable influence in local Lebanese and regional politics, both formally and informally.

each other. Further, tensions between kin systems and the state, as well as several non-state actors in Lebanon, change the very meaning and character of the public/private dynamic (Joseph, 1997). These dynamics, and the shifting boundaries between the government and domestic institutions, are actually a pivotal matter in understanding the gendering of women as a category, the strength of families and kin groups relative to the state in Lebanon, and the implications of this on women's situations and political contributions.

For decades, rights groups and feminists in Lebanon have been persistently lobbying the state for a unified civil personal status law, expecting it to unlock the grip of their sectarian communities (Joseph, 1997). Ironically, that state has been a primary contributor to the construction of these very communities as autonomous bodies. In this way, the state designed itself as a nation of sub-national sectarian patriarchal communities, legitimating their existence and empowering them over the daily lives of both women and men (ibid).

That said, state institutions were not always subservient to sectarian authorities. The relationship between the state and its sectarian sub-communities was neither simple nor stable, with the tensions between them manifesting particularly in the legislative battles and trajectories of civil laws addressing women's rights¹⁸, namely, the law for the protection of women against domestic violence.¹⁹

V. Lebanon as a Case Study

The Lebanese context is peculiar and does not fit into Western nor the Southern paradigms of state-building,²⁰ as discussed above. Lebanon is complex because it is

¹⁸ This paper was vetted by Suad Joseph, Azza Charara Baydoun, and Yumna Makhoul. This argument is the result of the engagement of Azza Charara Baydoun with this paper.

¹⁹ In 2007, the local organization KAFA (enough) Violence & Exploitation - gathered a team of judges, lawyers and a representative from the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to draft a law against domestic violence. In March 2008, Kafa launched the "Towards the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence" campaign, bringing together several organizations under the umbrella of the "National Coalition for Legislating the Protection of Women from Family Violence." Following three years of ongoing effort, the Coalition finally succeeded in issuing a draft law to protect women from domestic violence that gained the approval of the Lebanese ministerial cabinet in April 2010. It was then delegated to a parliamentary sub-committee to review it. However, the Muslim clerics - namely the country's highest Sunni authority - aggressively opposed its endorsement by parliament, demonizing it for "inciting the destruction of the Muslim family." The bill remained pending in parliament between 2010 and 2013. It took the sub-parliamentary committee tasked with its review 16 months to finalize its work in July 2012, and another 12 months for the joint parliamentary committees to approve the draft in July 2013 after making several amendments. This was followed by yet another nine months to pass the law in April 2014. Throughout the years, KAFA and the coalition's approach relied on engaging a wide range of stakeholders—such as doctors, lawyers, and security forces—right from the beginning. The coalition actively reached out to media representatives and invested substantial amounts of time in training, informing, and working closely with them; and providing expert advice on framing talk shows, reportages, and issues. Further, the coalition brought several non-traditional allies to the women's movement, such as the women's committees of different sectarian political parties, in order to win support for the draft bill. This intensive lobbying process culminated in a march that gathered over 5,000 people protesting on International Women's Day in 2014, one month before the parliamentary session that saw the passing of the law.

²⁰ In the past twenty years, in post-colonial states in the Global South, much hope was placed on the ability of the state to become the central force behind political reforms, economic development or even as the vehicle behind emancipatory transitions from Eurocentric to other forms of development. Latin American states followed different paths to re-articulate their presence in society, specifically, by seeking to extend webs of domination within their societies, while at the same time promoting emancipatory narratives about social and economic justice, regional integration, or the economic independence of the South. State power was constructed either through governments, embracing the notion of a state-centric development model, and undertaking drastic reforms driven by the belief in the state as a force for positive change in society, or through the state's linkages to (financial or political) elites.

rich with both continuities and discontinuities with the West and South. Distinguishing it from either construct is necessary to understand the peculiar forms of exclusion and discrimination that women and other marginalized groups in Lebanon face.

Using Lebanon as a case study of how the public/private is constructed as an imagined boundary, Joseph (1997) unpacks the multiple layers of oppression under which women in Lebanon struggle. She also paved the way for us to uncover the multiple points of contention between notions of state-building, citizenship, and selfhood under Western classical liberalism, and the more nuanced and complex versions of these notions in post-colonial states like Lebanon. Some of these illuminating points of contrast are:

➤ **Rights are relational**

The connective self – that sees itself embedded in others – is linked to “a relational notion of rights, where rights are generated in and embedded in significant relationships” (Joseph, 1997). In this paradigm, “people come to have rights by forging relationships with people who have access to critical resources and privileges” (ibid). In the Lebanese context, **rights are relational and do not inhere in the individualized person**. Citizenship has resultantly always entailed investing in relationships that grant access: “people have practiced and experienced their rights as a matter of knowing people upon whom they can make claims and who are located in critical places of access” (Joseph, 1997).

Not only are rights relational in Lebanon, the public sphere, too, is relational. **Contrary to the non-relational public dominant in liberal political theory, the public world in Lebanon has been, and remains very relational (ibid)**. Within it, both men and women are embedded in and identified by kin relations. Patriarchal kinship is a key prototype for relationships in the public sphere. Men are relational and carry their familial models of relationships beyond the domestic domain. While this holds largely true in the governmental sphere, it is questioned in the non-governmental domain (Joseph, 1997). The years that followed the end of the civil war witnessed the advent and proliferation of non-governmental organizations, which are autonomous entities that are financially independent from political parties and extended kin. This creates room to break the grip of patriarchal kinship in the non-governmental sphere.

➤ **The domestic is not separate from, but rather shares fluid boundaries with other spheres, and is sacredly sanctioned**

Politics has always been a definitive male enterprise in Lebanon, and the process through which women have been included as citizens has been structured around their sexual difference from men. Historically, women were brought into the social order as “inhabitants of a private sphere that is part of civil society yet separate from the world of freedom, equality and citizenship” (Pateman, 1989). The public sphere was assumed to be independent of private sexual relations and domestic life. Thus, the conception of a public world rested on an understanding of what or who is excluded from it and why. As such, liberal political theory frames the domestic as a bounded sphere distinctly separate from, and subordinate to, the public.

Conversely, in Lebanon, “the state sanctifies the family as immutable, non-negotiable, and God-given” (Joseph, 1997). As discussed, the country’s constitution grants sectarian communities permission to rule and regulate its family and personal status issues. So, not only is the domestic not subordinate to other, more public, spheres, it is rather embedded in them. It is also integral to the state-building enterprise in Lebanon, where it shapes and is shaped by the governmental and non-governmental spheres. This creates a porous system with elastic boundaries that change with shifting political and social alliances and relations that flow into the state, thus turning political relationships familial, and politicizing familial connections (Joseph, 1997).

It is the porousness, elasticity, and fluidity of the boundaries between the governmental, non-governmental, and domestic spheres that allow the domestic-based patriarchy to travel, though in different forms to the governmental and non-governmental spheres. Patriarchal kin modes of operation that start in the domestic sphere are produced and reproduced, albeit in varying degrees and forms, in the other two spheres (Joseph, 1997). This fluidity between the spheres is integral to the notion of patriarchal connectivity which is the cornerstone of the Lebanese patriarchal state-building project.

➤ **The public/private divide is too simplistic for the Lebanese context**

In many post-colonial states, extended family and kinship relationships continue to be used as foci of loyalty, mobilization, and political organizing. The Arab world provides abundant evidence. In many Arab countries, traditional social and familial relations leave women with few “formal citizenship ties” as Yuval-Davis (1997) frames it. Sometimes, in such contexts, women who are widows or daughters of deceased political leaders have the highest chance of becoming political leaders themselves. This reveals how, in post-colonial states, women often reach “critical places of access” exclusively through familial pathways.

The simplified binary of public/private glosses such dynamics. It also dilutes the competition between state and kin, and in many instances sectarian authorities, for power, resources, and personnel. As Mikdashi (2022) notes, however, this social structure and the embeddedness of patriarchy in Lebanon does not make Lebanon “an exception”; “rather, [Lebanon] is exemplary” of the intense, amplified, and persistent nature of this continuity.

These continuities are simply different expressions of the power of patriarchy in the country, and the paradigm under which women live. Under this power paradigm, political authorities, decision-makers, and family patriarchs rarely find value in appointing women to key decision-making positions, or in inviting them to participate in electoral lists. In the patriarchal kin language, which is central and dominant in all spheres of social and political activity, women are official representatives neither of their sectarian communities and families, nor of electoral districts.

The political, legal, and social situation of women in any context is often the result of the intersection between the dominant construct of self, and the major features of the state-building project. Exploring Lebanon as a case study of the peculiar forms of discrimination against women reveals multiple contrasts between notions of state-building, rights, and citizenship under classical liberalism, and the more nuanced

versions of these notions in a post-colonial state like Lebanon. One such notion is *backlash* – particularly against women’s rights.

VI. Framing Backlash in the Lebanese Context

This nuanced overview of the context in Lebanon is necessary to discuss and define backlash against the feminist movement and women’s rights in the country.

An acceptable starting point to describe backlash—or an equivalent to it in the Lebanese context—would be *“the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion that are fed, incubated and fuelled by the sectarian system; and that not only fight and obstruct advocacy for rights, but more importantly, impede the possibility of progress. This structural discrimination not only travels across generations, but also cut through governmental, non-governmental, and familial institutions.”*²¹

In their study on the Shah Bano controversy in India, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2006) use the term *“structured disempowerment of Muslim women”* to describe how the Indian sectarian rift influenced the Indian women’s movement. The study looked at how Shari’a law and the Muslim Women’s Bill forced a sectarian division on the Indian women’s community and impacted Indian women’s lives (Hasan & Menon, 2006). While the two contexts are difficult to compare, the term “structured disempowerment” is strikingly relatable to the situation of women in Lebanon.

In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists who led community projects or campaigns to discuss what backlash means, and what it looks like, in the Lebanese context.

One of the themes that participants discussed at length is the influence of the “structured disempowerment” of women in Lebanon regarding their political participation and access to decision-making positions. They seemed to unanimously agree that women’s road to political decision-making in Lebanon remains rigged with impossibilities, and that they remain at a structural disadvantage to this day. The most recent exemplification of this is women’s limited roles, contributions, and participation in the electoral lists for parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2022.²² In the parliamentary elections of 2018, only 113 (less than 15%) of those who submitted their candidacy were women. Only 86 out of the 113 women were selected on electoral lists. Equally important to the number of women fielded on lists is the number of preferential votes²³

²¹ In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context, in February 2022. This definition was put together collaboratively with the selected feminists who participated in this session.

²² In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context, in February 2022. Women’s limited contributions in elections was a very present theme during the session.

²³ In 2017, after years of political disputes and recurrent extensions of the parliament’s term since 2009, the leaders of the major political parties passed, in parliament, a proportional electoral law for the first time in the country’s history. The law, like its predecessors, reserves seats to the different sects in Lebanon based on the 5:5 Christian-Muslim formula, but includes several reforms, as formerly proposed by the “Boutros Commission” (e.g., using official pre-printed ballots, holding all district elections on the same day, etc.). The law, which was implemented in

that these women received. Only half of the women who made it on the lists (43) received more than 227 preferential votes²⁴, while only two received 10,000 preferential votes.

In the lead-up to the parliamentary elections in May 2022, numbers revealed that only 157 women had signed up to run out of a total of 1043 candidates, or only 15%.²⁵ The 2022 parliamentary elections have also seen instances of explicit family shunning of certain women candidates. For instance, the Zeaiter clan from Bekaa (northeast region of Lebanon) published a statement, denouncing Sara Zeaiter for running with an opposition list. The statement did not fail to underline the clan's loyalty to the heavyweight, better-known male candidate from a hegemonic political party, Ghazi Zeaiter. Moves like this are but direct manifestations of family-based patriarchy flowing into the governmental and the political realms.

“As preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections are ongoing, the notion of political families’ legacies still prevails. Tribal, clan, and family systems grant the sectarian political system its depth and enable its continuity.”

Joumana Merhi²⁶

Tribal, clan, and family systems serve as fortifiers of the sectarian political system and fuel its resistance to change and readiness to insulate itself. As discussed, women remain the weakest links in their families, and resultantly in their communities, social groups, and political parties. Backlash in this context then is structural and pervasive rather than reactive and contained in time. It does, however, remain violent towards the feminist movement and to women because “it makes their path to politics almost impossible.”²⁷

Interestingly, it is mostly the non-governmental sphere that gives women breathing space amid this doom. The non-governmental space is where the margin for reproducing family-based patriarchal dynamics shrinks to its lowest compared to the other spheres. The story of a feminist and a leading figure on a major environmental campaign,²⁸ Amani El Beaini, best captures this.²⁹

two electoral rounds in 2018 and 2022, although allows for better representation and greater competition than the majoritarian system, nevertheless has proven to require further reforms to ensure a better and just assessment of voters' voices.

²⁴ Under the preferential voting system, voters are encouraged to align themselves with parties or candidates representing their religious or sectarian identity, further reinforcing Lebanese politics' sectarian nature. This can create a situation where voters prioritize a candidate's religious affiliation over their qualifications or policy positions. Additionally, the preferential voting system can lead to vote-splitting and factionalism within individual sectarian groups, as voters rank candidates within their preferred party or list based on personal or familial ties rather than political ideology or experience. Overall, the preferential voting system in Lebanon can contribute to political polarization, fragmentation, and gridlock, making it difficult for the country to address pressing social and economic issues effectively.

²⁵ Only 4 women, out of 8 in total, won as part of the “Change MP” coalition.

²⁶ In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context, in February 2022. This is a direct quote of one of the participating leading feminist activists in Lebanon, Joumana Merhi.

²⁷ This is a direct quote of one of the participating leading feminist activists in Lebanon, Joumana Merhi.

²⁸ El Beaini campaigned for years to stop the construction of a dam that threatens the ecological balance of a vast area in the southern region of Lebanon.

²⁹ In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in

Born and raised in a socially and religiously traditional, intensely politically affiliated family³⁰, El Beaini first started exhibiting signs of rebellion as early as her elementary school years. In her school where gender stereotypes prevailed, girls were not allowed to practice sports, but El Beaini would insist on playing basketball, so she joined a community team outside school to do that. Twenty years later, El Beaini was at the forefront of the battle to stop the notorious Bisri dam project, and a vital member of the National Campaign to Protect the Bisri Valley.³¹ However, despite the fact that the project initially had Jumblatt's blessing, her parents supported her position against it. However, the turning point in El Beaini's story was the brutal assault she suffered at the hands of a member of her extended family, who had previously assaulted another member of the campaign, and who was resultantly detained until Amani herself intervened for his release. El Beaini insisted on taking the man to the police station, and later to court, for his assault. Yet, to her dismay and disappointment, she endured pressure from within her own family to dissuade her from proceeding with her complaint. She refused to concede.

In a classic paternalistic scenario, El Beaini found herself being denied justice simply for demanding it from a male family member. For the family, it was expected of the woman to heed to the community's massive pressure and drop charges. Community pressure did not stop there. Since El Beaini filed her complaint, the proceedings were significantly slowed down as police officers showed reluctance to officialise the complaint and proceed with it.

Facing insidious pressures across and between the governmental and the domestic spheres, El Beaini received massive support and endorsement from actors in the non-governmental sphere: Rights' groups, activists, feminists, and think tanks—all organizations that have previously worked and liaised with her on the Bisri project, and the assault she underwent, specifically the Legal Agenda in Lebanon, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in Geneva. So far, it appears that the non-governmental space – also commonly known as, but not restricted to civil society—has indeed been the most helpful and empowering sphere for women activists attempting to make changes in their communities. It looks like the family-based patriarchy that has flooded into the governmental sphere has so far been relatively limited in the non-governmental sphere. This is why it can be argued that it remained a somewhat safe haven for feminists and women activists to network, liaise, and build bridges for their own self-care and for the movement.

the Lebanese context, in February 2022. The story was narrated during AiW's convening session in February 2022, with consent to use in this paper.

³⁰ The Beaini family is one of the first and largest families to swear allegiance to the Druze (a sect) community's senior patriarch and leading politician Walid Jumblatt. Walid Jumblatt assumed leadership of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) in Lebanon after the assassination of his father, Kamal Jumblatt, during the civil war. Under the leadership of Walid Jumblatt, the PSP affirmed its role as an essentially Druze militia, and then, as a Druze political party, during and after the civil war years respectively. To date, the PSP, now headed by Walid Jumblatt's son, Taymour Jumblatt, operates as the largest representative party for the Druze community in Lebanon's sectarian political system. See El-Husseini, R. (2012). *Pax Syriana: Elite politics in postwar Lebanon*. Syracuse University Press. & Gerlach, S. (2017). Political Leadership in Lebanon and the Jumblatt phenomenon: Tipping the Scales of Lebanese politics. *Tipping Points*, 84.

³¹ In the Bisri valley, situated 35km south of Beirut, the World Bank had funded (before cancelling the undisbursed funds of the project) a water supply augmentation project, known as the 'Bisri Dam Project'. Despite the World Bank's and major politicians' promises that the project would supply residents of Beirut and Mount Lebanon with improved water services, environmental and rights activists as well as landowners in the area opposed it for being an ecological disaster that will cost over 6 million metres of mostly agricultural lands to deliver drinking water from a highly contaminated source to the country's capital.

“It would not have been possible for me to go on fighting for Bisri - or any other cause; or even to insist on proceeding with my complaint against Imad (the assailant), had it not been for the support of peers and colleagues from civil society.”

*Amani El Beaini*³²

El Beaini’s story is not uncommon. It points to the crucial role of the non-governmental sphere in pushing back and resisting “structural disempowerment” (Hasan & Menon, 2006). This role does not stop at supporting individual activists, but extends to moments of resistance, such as the eight year-long battle to pass the 203/2014 law for the protection of women against domestic violence;³³ the thorough follow-up with different judicial authorities to ensure its implementation; and lastly its amendment process in 2020. In the past decade, actors in the non-governmental sphere, notably non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have been functioning as resistance actors to the deeply embedded power of the patriarchal state-building project in Lebanon.

However, this came at a price. Following the first few days of the October 2019 uprising, the oligarchy used the mobilization of various NGOs to advance their secular, feminist, and human rights agenda within the protest wave, to frame the uprising as led by international agencies’ funding, and to justify their fierce opposition and demonization. For multiple reasons, most important of which is the fear of destabilizing the grip of the sectarian elites on the country, NGOs, their supporters, and other protesters faced extreme political and moral violence throughout the uprising. While traditional political parties framed the confrontation as “we” (the legitimate representatives of the Lebanese citizens) against “them” (the protestors who are supposedly supported by foreign agencies), the civil society movement and protesters framed their confrontation against “all of them” (the entire post-war ruling class). Throughout, the ruling class kept trying to demonize the movement while the latter was trying to advance an agenda for change.

This is primarily why the umbrella term “civil society” is being gradually, but consistently demonized by leading figures of the regime. Ironically, political leaders across the spectrum have drastically different views on most issues but share “suspicion and scepticism” of NGO activity in the country³⁴. This scepticism revolves particularly around the funding that these organizations receive, and their role in fuelling dissent across the country and destabilizing the status quo. Interestingly, these suspicions seem to rise and take on serious accusatory tones during election cycles³⁵.

Below is one striking example tying the uprising in 2019 to “groups with funding” from the leading figure of Hezbollah:

There are also certain people and institutions leading the movement (...) There is management, coordination and funding. No one should pretend that there is no funding (...) We have demonstrated, taken to the streets and protested in the squares. We know that in order to stay in the squares and arenas, you need to

³² This is a direct quote of one of the participating feminist activists, El Beaini.

³³ Refer to footnote 19 for more details on the law.

³⁴ In the context of the “Countering the Backlash” project, funded by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context, in February 2022. During a convening session in February 2022, feminist journalist and filmmaker Diana Mokalled highlighted this argument.

³⁵ Ibid

provide food, drink, medicine, media coverage, sound systems and phones. All this needs money. Do you agree that this is coming from the poor people? Of course not. There are certain parties that are funding. (...) let them explain to us just as they are requesting transparency. (Hezbollah General Secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, October 2019)

In the past year, the suspicion around “funded protests” and “groups with vested interest donating for political causes” doubled down on “civil society.” This reveals an intense and systematic attack by most political parties on NGOs, framing them as political opponents and demanding transparency ahead of the elections.

Look at the civil society groups, the followers of the American embassy always protesting against Hezbollah, always criticizing its weapons and arms. I ask them: what services have you provided the people to choose you? (Deputy General Secretary of Hezbollah, Naim Kassem, February 2022)

VII. Conclusion

Facing this insidious matrix of patriarchal structures, women in Lebanon and feminists in particular are left with a few avenues for action. As explored and discussed above, the exclusion, discrimination, and violence that women in Lebanon face occurs in all spheres of life. These challenges are a result of entrenched power structures that flow from family systems into the social and political institutions as well as the state. However, the non-governmental sphere remains an important breathing space and a safe haven for feminists and gender justice actors to network and build solidarity.

That said, the definition of backlash in mainstream literature as a hostile reaction or response to a destabilization in the status-quo does not hold in this context, where violence is pervasive, structural, and embedded in the very systems making up our families, communities, and state.

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