

Backlash in the Lebanese media

- **Introduction**

In the context of Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice project – under the Policy & Practice strand, the Arab Institute for Women produced a case study unpacking the different forms and manifestations backlash – discrimination and exclusion - against women and their rights in the popular space in Lebanon. Within the popular space, this case study hones in on mainstream media in Lebanon, specifically on the coverage of talk shows and news bulletin reports of four crimes against women – a murder, an attempted murder, and two battles of child custody - in a timeframe of 3 years (2019 -2022).

The case study starts with a brief framing of the concept of backlash in Lebanon, and provides a contextual definition of backlash that sets the stage for a thorough discussion of the ways in which the different forms and manifestations of backlash against women in Lebanon are normalized and reinforced by the media.

After the contextual definition, the first section of this case study presents an overview of the history of both the press and the audiovisual media in Lebanon, followed by a focus on the history and progression of the talk show genre on Lebanese television, its approach to issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality, and the shift in discourse around these issues that marked Lebanese media over a decade ago. The second section of this case study focuses on the trends observed in several talk shows – as well as in news reports covering crimes against women in the past few years (2019-2022) – with a focus on four cases of gender-based violence: the murder of model Zeina Kanjo, the attempted murder of Lara Shaaban, the battles of Lilian Sheaito, and Ghina Al-Bayat’s for child custody. Other cases - the murder of Manal Assi in 2014 and the recent murder of Laila Rizk in 2022 – are also referenced throughout the case study. The final section focuses on the talk show *Fawq el 18* (Over 18) and its engagement with topics such as gender-based violence.

The four crimes that this case study focuses on were chosen based on the frequency and intensity of the media coverage that their victims received. It is also worth elaborating on the choice of timeframe before proceeding. A local feminist news website *Sharika WaLaken* recorded a 107% increase in murders of Lebanese girls and women in 2020: 27 murders took place in 2020, up from 13 the year before (2019). According to the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), 1,468 incidents of domestic violence were reported to the domestic violence hotline between February 2020 and January 2021, compared to less than half that number the year before. However, out of the thousands of crimes committed against women, only a handful of cases garnered public attention. As this paper will argue, this is because these cases increased show ratings and, therefore, provided fodder for the competition between different media outlets. Their “popularity” in public discourse is ultimately what made them “worthy” of being featured on television.

1. Contextual Definition of Backlash

In contrast to the definition that frames backlash mostly as a violent or hostile *reaction or response* to progress made within and/or by the women's movement, the hostility experienced by women in Lebanon in all spheres is pervasive, structural, and embedded in the very systems that make up their families, communities, and state. A contextual definition of backlash in Lebanon, therefore, might include, *"the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion- across time and generations- that cut through governmental, non-governmental, media, and familial institutions; and that are fed, incubated, and fueled by the sectarian system; and that not only prevent and hinder rights-based initiatives and advocacy, but also fight the possibility of progress and the acquisition of feminist gains."*¹

2. The media landscape in Lebanon

Lebanon is the birthplace of the first independent daily Arab political newspaper, and the first Arab state to legalize and regulate private sector television and radio broadcasting. The right to freedom of the press and freedom of expression are enshrined in the country's constitution.

Lebanon's media landscape is dominated by the country's political and economic oligarchy, unlike most Arab countries, where the media is state-dominated or controlled. Most Lebanese mainstream media outlets are either directly owned or significantly aligned with a political party or politician. This makes the media scene in Lebanon, according to Lebanese media scholar Nabil Dajani, "highly partisan". "It functions within a framework of a centralized but institutionally weak state [that] is deployed instrumentally by a sectarian/political elite" (Dajani, 2006). This largely explains why the media is perceived as a tool within a broader system of control that contributes to the reproduction of polarized, sectarian identities, and the reinforcement of sect-based political allegiance.

As such, Dajani (2006) argues that media freedom in Lebanon is a "myth" as the limits of this freedom are embedded within the country's sectarian structures, rather than enforced by the government. Salloukh et al. (2015) maintain the same line of thought contending that media practitioners in Lebanon mostly "become part of a stubborn institutional and clientelist complex dependent on different sectarian leaders for financial sustainability and operating within the patronage networks across all sectors and domains" (p.2).

2.1 The audiovisual scene

The media industry's current structure dates back to the onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, when 40 to 50 television stations emerged de facto as a result of the war, representing the standpoints of the

¹ In February 2022 and 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. This definition was put together collaboratively with the selected feminists who participated in this session.

different warring parties. This polarized media environment contributed to the erosion of the government's central power. To maintain the fragile civil peace of the 1990s, the Lebanese government licensed the most prominent broadcasting stations. By carefully choosing the stations it licensed, the government institutionalized confessionalism in the media by favoring political affiliation and partisanship over expertise and competence. The stations that received licenses all belonged to political officials across sectarian backgrounds, their family members, or business partners. Resultantly, Lebanese media outlets serve as mouthpieces for the political parties and/or politicians that own them, in what Dajani (2001) describes as "a less violent continuation of war". Dajani contends that the government's approach manifested in the "low quality entertainment programs with the sole purpose of entertainment", with no regard to citizens' concerns; giving "predominant attention to commercialism at the expense of professionalism and social responsibility" (Dajani, 2001, p. 8). This interdependency of politics and media in Lebanon has indeed prioritized local, regional, and global politics at the expense of questions of social justice.

Despite the advent of a new generation of young, progressive journalists, as well as the growth of a vibrant civil society over the last decade, local and regional politics remain high on the priority scale of local media outlets. Further, and despite the influence and dominance of social media in the past decade, news sources on social media networks – such as news websites and social media pages – television remains the main source of information for the Lebanese public, with social media coming in second place (Ahwach, 2021).

Until 2019, Lebanon had nine private television channels carefully crafted not to disturb the country's political-sectarian set-up. Lebanese researcher and journalist Sahar Mandour (2013) delineates the landscape as follows: "four Christian Maronite channels (LBCI, OTV, Télé Lumière, and Noursat), one Christian Orthodox channel (MTV), one Muslim Sunnite channel (Future TV), two Muslim Shiite channels (NBN and AlManar), and one independent channel with a traditional leftist agenda (AlJadeed)" (Mandour, 2013, p. 14) During the post-civil war era, Tele Liban, the only public television channel, had been thrown to the fringes of the media scene in Lebanon, as a result of the legalization of politically-affiliated broadcast stations, and the limited state funding (Mandour, 2013). Each of these nine stations bolsters a distinct political-sectarian affiliation to one of the country's major parties. Indeed, the Lebanese Media Ownership Monitor of Reporters without Borders indicates that five of these nine outlets are either owned or co-owned by politicians; three are owned by former political figures or businessmen with political affiliations; and one is explicitly framed as the media arm of a political party.² Today, with significantly downsized political budgets, the economic collapse, and the receding power of a few political parties, there are eight television channels left after one of the stations closed along with tens of other media outlets (mostly newspapers and news websites).³

Two features have been known to endure and persist across the different media outlets in Lebanon in general, and across these channels specifically: 1) the unavoidability of engaging with sectarian politics

² It is worth noting that the current media laws have no provisions preventing politicians from owning shares in media companies

³ The press in Lebanon has arguably taken the strongest hit as a result of the economic and financial collapse. It has been immensely challenged by the growth of social media networks. A number of Lebanese press closed down, downsized, or failed to pay staff salaries. Assafir newspaper closed permanently in 2016; followed by Al Mustaqbal (2019); as well as the Daily Star, which announced its closure and laid off all of its employees without prior notice, in December 2021, following months of inconsistent pay.

and sectarian-political affiliation, and 2) conservatism – in varying degrees – and the maintenance of a solid relationship with the religious (Muslim and Christian) clergy. Yet, despite explicitly aligning themselves with sectarian politics, some of these channels are considered “secular” in the sense of refraining from adopting an explicit religious discourse, but still remain an open platform for religious clergy, often citing them as moral and ethical references (Mandour, 2013). Similarly, despite the difficulty of disentangling from sectarian-political affiliations, a few channels are said to operate within wider margins of independence, resultantly engaging with diverse audiences.

2.2 Talk shows

A few decades ago, what was on Lebanese television was “a mélange of various inconsistent programs, policies and structures, predominantly foreign in orientation and barely relevant to the needs of Lebanese society” (Dajani, 2001, p. 6). To some extent, this still holds true.

A traditional public/private dichotomy can be found in the context of Lebanese television, creating the talk show genre that operates on a constructed political/social binary on screen (El Rahi, 2011). The “political” in the context of Lebanese talk shows are those typically broadcasted on weekday evenings, usually with a middle-aged male host, moderating a discussion with one, or a panel of politicians, political analysts, or economists, about the day-to-day developments of Lebanese institutional politics. In Lebanon, these television programs – usually dubbed “political” – never address issues related to women’s rights, gender, and/or sexuality. In fact, Lebanese political talk shows steer away from these issues, and relegate them to the realm of the “social.” “Social programs,” on the other hand, are shows that run either every morning or on weekday evenings. They are often hosted by a media celebrity and adopt a condemnatory, morally-charged approach that relies on concern for general social interest.

With a conservative discourse, these “social” programs carefully frame their topics as modern, bold, and catering to the youth’s progressive interests. These social programs resort to sensationalist tools and adopt a scandalous and voyeuristic approach to sexuality, thus normalizing the violation of people’s privacy and routinely exposing their guests for no purpose. Ironically, while these shows claim to sound the alarm against mores that threaten the social fabric, and to guard society’s morality, in reality, these shows’ hosts raise moral panics, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and prioritize sensationalism over analysis and thorough discussions on the matters at hand.

Mandour (2013) discusses the talk show genre as one of two types of programs dealing with issues of gender and sexuality on Lebanese television. Framing talk shows as “socially concerned,” she argues that “this genre attempts to adopt an objective yet morally-charged discourse out of “concern over social wellbeing.” Further, she lists what seems to be this genre’s “favorite topics”, which revolve around “homosexuality, trans-sexuality, extra-marital sex, virginity, sex work, domestic violence, and marital rape” (Mandour, 2013, p. 15). Despite varying degrees of conservatism, and although show hosts shift between different television channels and change their shows’ names over the years, their approach to issues of sexuality has remained sensational and voyeuristic. The shows either exoticize these issues while

othering women and members of the LGBTIQ⁴ communities, or criminalize them, thus reinforcing religious norms and traditions (Mandour, 2013).

Despite the severe political division among the channels airing these “socially concerned” shows, Mandour notes that the different televised debates on sexuality adopt a very similar format, abiding by almost the same set of judgmental values. In practice, this means that “episodes largely follow the same organization: A show often hosts a person who identifies as a homosexual or a non-virgin single woman (with a blurred face and/or voice) as a case study examined by a religious figure (Muslim and/or Christian), a social scientist (most likely a psychologist), and sometimes a lawyer and/or an activist” (Mandour, 2013, p. 6). *Enta Horr* (You Are Free, MTV) is one such show. The show aired between 2012 and 2016 and competed with other equally popular shows such as *Ahmar Bil Khat El Arid* (The Bold Red Line, LBCI), *Sireh W'nfatahet* (Let's Discuss, Future Television – now permanently closed), *Lil Nashr* (Material For Publishing, Al-Jadeed), over various topics. All of these shows have since stopped airing, except for *Ahmar Bil Khat El Arid*. Other shows also aired for a few seasons and stopped – such as Tony Khalife (the eponymous show), and *Fawda* (Chaos).

In her piece questioning whether Heya TV counts as “a feminist counterpublic for Arab women”, Dina Matar (2007, p. 13) argues that one of the advantages of the non-hierarchical nature of the newly emerging technologies and of satellite television, is the substantial rise of public discussions about subjects previously-deemed taboo concerning women such as domestic violence and honor killing. Indeed, while Arab women benefit to a large extent from the nonhierarchical nature of the newly-emerging technologies and of satellite television, she contends, the structure of the media industry itself and the socio-cultural context engulfing it impede its total exploitation to subvert oppression (Matar 2007, p. 14).

The following sections of this paper will elaborate on two shows - the first is *Enta Horr*, to delineate the shift in discourse on gender and sexuality over a decade ago; and the second is *Fawq el 18* with the host Rabia Al Zayat⁵, which first aired in October 2021 and is still being broadcast to discuss trends of resurging hostility and backlash against women's rights on Lebanese in television.

2.3 Shifting discourse on gender and sexuality

In 2012, a provoking episode of the show *Enta Horr* led to a police raid on Cinema Plaza, in the Beirut suburb of Bourj Hammoud and the arrest of 36 men under Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal code⁶ who

⁴ LGBTIQ refers to members of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, intersexual, and queer community.

⁵ Rabia Al-Zayat's show “Above 18” has become one of the most controversial TV shows in Lebanese media. The show hosts some of the most popular figures in Lebanon (including youths, media figures, activists, religious leaders etc.) and generates controversial conversations on issues related to religion, gender, sexuality, marriage, violence, social media popularity etc. The purpose of the show is claimed to be sparking discussions by creating a debate between culture and tradition.

⁶ Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which criminalizes “sexual relations that contradict the laws of nature”, is a legacy of the French colonial rule. The vague term is an umbrella that comprises all sexual practices that do not serve the aim of procreation (i.e. homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, anal sex, etc.), and is mostly used to persecute the gay community. Article 534 is also a reflection of a traditional moral value system, predicated on rigid and conservative gender roles and relations and the supremacy of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family.

happened to be there. The episode featured footage secretly taken from the abandoned cinema, showing men engaging in sexual acts or watching pornographic clips. The reporter who shot the footage seduced some of the men, luring them into the bathroom, with the intention of having sex, a strategy that was later used as evidence of “immorality” and “homosexuality”. After showing the footage, the show’s host Joe Maalouf expressed disgust with what he saw, and urged the police to arrest the “perverts.” A popular Lebanese journalist and show host whose work spanned different Lebanese television stations through the years, Maalouf typically focused on topics deemed controversial and often taboo. Though celebrated as an advocate of human rights and media freedom⁷, Maalouf often approaches topics of gender and sexuality with a sensationalist lens, and frequently provides a platform for perpetrators of sexual violence and violations, propagating their narratives, under the guise of journalistic objectivity and “hearing both sides of the story”.

During the Cinema Plaza episode, Maalouf urged religious authorities and mobilized the police to “do their job and rectify the situation.” Indeed, the police did not disappoint Maalouf, and shortly after the episode, raided the Cinema Plaza and arrested 36 men on the charges of homosexuality (Lebanese Penal Code, Art. 534). Upon their arrest, the 36 detainees were forced to undergo anal testing – an obsolete practice that amounts to rape, used in Lebanese police stations when investigating homosexuality charges. This prompted a resounding reaction from civil society organizations, activists, and think tanks, who too to social media platforms to call for boycotting the show and the channel that broadcasted it, MTV. Resultantly, a competing local channel (LBCI) also covered the raid and dedicated several news reports to condemning the incident. The news bulletin reports spread like wildfire on social media platforms, triggering a wave of articles and statements that asserted support for sexual freedom and denounced the archaic penal code 534, the obsolete police practices, and the shameful behavior of Maalouf and MTV. This, in turn, led to a series of statements from the Order of Physicians and from the Ministry of Justice denouncing anal testing. Facing pressure from multiple directions, MTV found itself cornered and was forced to issue a statement declaring its support of sexual freedoms (Mandour, 2013). In her research on the development of the discourse on sexuality in Lebanese media, Mandour (2013) contends that the “media war” unleashed by the Cinema Plaza raid “marked a major swing in the moral standards governing coverage of sexuality and sexual rights on television, shifting the stigma from homosexuality to homophobia” (Mandour, 2013, p.17). It also triggered an unprecedented scale of questioning of the conservative media coverage of sexuality – which had never been challenged – moving from delivering unquestioned homophobic coverage of incidents, to confronting “institutional homophobia”.

However, what Mandour (2013) frames as the era of “confronting institutional homophobia and sexism” did not last long. Over the past few years, the approach to gender issues on Lebanese talk shows specifically, and Lebanese media generally, seems to have regressed to its conservative approach. This method of presenting is based mostly on the myth of protecting morality and public decency, while serving as a firewall that maintains and reinforces the impunity of criminals by consistently treating their crimes – domestic and gender/sexuality-based violence – as a “point of view.”

⁷ In 2020, Maalouf founded the NGO Qarama, to “promote a dignified and protective environment for the most vulnerable children and youth in Lebanon.

Some shows – namely *Fawq el 18* – signal the resurgence of a wave of talk shows that frame crimes like domestic violence and child marriage as just another debatable topic, turning these crimes into a spectacle and sensationalizing violence for ratings. *Fawq el 18* officially crossed the line of objectification of women and has now entered into the wilderness of commodifying their predicament and turning their daily suffering into a form of trauma porn⁸ for the show’s viewers. While the reasons why authorities in Lebanon continue to protect perpetrators of gender-based violence are deeply-embedded, multi-layered, and complex, it can be argued that it is shows like this, and their influence on public opinion, that have emboldened these authorities – throughout the years – to uphold the impunity of sex offenders. Though this has not been proven yet, it is evident as hardly any of the known aggressors and perpetrators are found guilty, or serve time for their crimes.

With the sharp hike in gender-based violence crimes in recent years⁹, primetime news reports also started covering femicide and domestic violence crimes. Despite entering the political sphere as a public opinion issue, domestic violence crimes, as well as grave human rights violations on the basis of gender and sexual orientation, are still covered with the same sensationalist and scandalous discourse and approach.

3. Representations of Violence Against Women

The following section discusses the trends observed in several shows, as well as in news reports, covering crimes against women in the past few years (2019-2022) with a primary focus on the following four cases: the murder of model Zeina Kanjo, the attempted murder of Lara Shaaban, and the child custody battles of Lilian Sheaito and Ghina Al-Bayat. This section also mentions other cases such as the murder of Manal Assi in 2014, and the murder of Laila Rizk in 2022. The final section will focus on the show *Fawq el 18* and its engagement with topics such as gender-based violence.

In January 2021, only six months into their marriage, Ibrahim Ghazal, **Zeina Kanjo's** husband, strangled her to death in their house in Ain El Mreisseh. According to reports, Kanjo had already filed a domestic abuse complaint against her husband, and was about to start with divorce proceedings, before Ghazal committed his crime. After Ghazal fled to Turkey, he was officially charged, in absentia, with murder. From Turkey, Ghazal flew to Sweden, where he remained free until Sweden’s judiciary arrested him in December 2022, following an international Interpol warrant requested by Lebanon’s public prosecutor. In May 2023, Sweden announced that its condition to extradite Ghazal is that Lebanon refrains from sentencing him to capital punishment.

⁸ Trauma Porn is a term coined in 2014 to describe the exploitation and hyper-consumption of trauma. It has since then been widely used to describe the phenomenon of the media’s obsession with the pain and suffering of vulnerable and marginalized communities, namely communities of color in the US and women. Feminists define trauma porn broadly as any media that showcases a group’s pain and traumatic experiences in excess for the sake of the entertainment of non-marginalized groups. This includes voyeuristically discussing gender-based violence, and exploiting suffering to create emotionally provocative and/or comedy material.

⁹ The first seven months of 2022 in Lebanon saw 14 women killed by their partners, compared to 18 in the whole of 2021. The numbers of people who received help from the NGO Kafa point to a general upward trend over the past five years: 1,082 in 2017, 1,107 in 2018, 907 in 2019, 1,583 in 2020, and 1,396 in 2021.

These numbers come from the article: Lebanon’s economic collapse prompts rise in gender-based violence, published in The New Humanitarian, October 4, 2022. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/10/4/Lebanon-economic-collapse-gender-based-violence>

- Framing violence against women as a point of view

The Lebanese media has a considerably long history of whitewashing criminals. Over the years, different shows and media celebrities have given perpetrators – men who have killed their wives, or who have been accused of rape or sexual violence – considerable airtime on their platforms. Recent examples of this include an episode of Joe Maalouf’s show in 2019, where he hosted serial harasser and rapist Marwan Habib¹⁰, and a few years later, in 2021, opening his platform up to priests who wanted to defend the serial child molester Father Mansour Labaki.¹¹

Similarly, in the days following the murder of Zeina Kanjo, different television shows as well as several news reports hosted her husband, Ibrahim Al-Ghazal, the main suspect, by phone, live on television. This gave him ample time and space to justify himself and make a series of accusations against Zeina, his victim, as well as her family and friends. He was repeatedly asked about his “reasons” for killing her, and whether he regretted it. It became apparent quite quickly that reporters and television show hosts were not *questioning* Al-Ghazal’s guilt but instead, were more interested in “discussing” his supposed reasons for murdering his wife. This practice is reminiscent of the landmark case of Manal Al-Assi. In the events surrounding his trial for the murder of his wife Manal Assi, the accused and subsequently convicted killer Mohamed al-Nuhaili was featured on a talk show (*A’atel Aan Al Horriye* [Unfree], MTV) to discuss his predicament. This practice does not only establish and frame the act of murder – the killing of women specifically – as a point of view or somehow “negotiable,” but also, ironically, presents only one “side of the story”, and it’s the uncontested narrative of the criminal.

Manal Assi was a mother of two, brutally murdered by her husband Mohamed al-Nuhaili, in a 7-hour spree of beating in 2014. Despite having admitted to committing this heinous crime, the man received a light sentence (5 years in prison only) as late as 2016.

On April 19, 2022, pharmacist **Leila Rizk** was murdered in her own pharmacy in Mrouj, El Metn, Lebanon. Based on confessions and forensic inspections, Rizk was said to have been strangled to death, and according to investigators, no traces of theft or rape have been collected. A few months later in June, two suspects (who were claimed to be Syrian nationals) were arrested, and one of the suspects is said to have been diagnosed with intellectual disabilities.

Unfortunately, murder is not the only crime against women that the media features as a point of view. Depriving women of the custody of their children is another crime against them that is often presented as merely a marital dispute, rather than as a crime rooted in the biased and patriarchal sectarian personal status laws that discriminate against women. Knowing the limitations of the Jaafari personal

¹⁰ Since 2019, Marwan Habib has been accused of harassing several women and girls in Lebanon. Although many lawsuits have been filed against Habib and an arrest warrant has been issued for him in Lebanon, he was nevertheless spared justice due to his alleged connections with a prominent political party. More recently however, after assaulting a woman in a Hotel in Miami, Florida, Habib was arrested and jailed without bond in the United States. He was accused of sexual battery, in addition to charges of burglary and assault.

¹¹ Mansour Labaki is a Lebanese priest who was first accused of the sexual abuse of three minors in an orphanage he ran in the 1990’s in France, in addition to several other accusations of harassment in France and Lebanon, around 2011. In 2013, Labaki was first convicted by the Vatican; and in 2016, an international arrest warrant was issued against him, but the Lebanese state refused to hand him over. Recently, he was sentenced to 15 years of prison by a French court. Yet, Labaki is reportedly seeking refuge in Lebanon, and Lebanese courts are yet to take any action against him.

status laws, Ghina Al-Bayat took to Facebook to launch an appeal to the world and to share her predicament of being deprived of her two-week old baby. This prompted various media outlets to cover her story, focusing mostly on the legal aspects of it. Media outlets also accompanied her live on air to her lawyer's office to reunite with her child. When the live episode with Al-Bayat's lawyer ended, the reporter called her husband, Rabih Hamza, live on camera to "hear his point of view" on why he snatched a two-week-old away from her mother. The husband justified his actions by claiming that the baby was allergic to animals, and that his wife left her baby with her dog, and the dog had attacked the child. The husband's excuse was that he was fearful the dog "would eat" his baby. Regardless of the scientifically inaccurate information that the man divulged, his defense also included details of his wife's psychological condition, the name of her therapist, and the therapist's address – all of which constitute sensitive information that should not have been disclosed to the general public under any circumstances.

Shortly after **Ghina Al-Bayyat** gave birth, her husband took their daughter away and prevented Al-Bayyat from seeing her. Al-Bayyat thus filed a lawsuit at the Jaafari court to be able to see her 15-day old daughter. After she took to social media to ask for support, and after much popular mobilization, the court finally issued a decision to give Al-Bayyat her infant back under the supervision and oversight of her husband.

- Framing the murder of women as acts of passion

Crimes against women and violations of their bodies and basic rights, and particularly murder, are frequently framed as acts of love and an expression of jealousy. The news report about the attempted murder of Lara Shaaban that aired on Al-Jadeed began with the phrase, "He wanted her for himself only," against a backdrop of classical music. This presentation normalizes typical patterns of aggressive and toxic masculinity by constructing them as "romantic" or "passionate" crimes committed in the "heat of the moment."¹² The strategic framing of the man's attack on his wife with a dagger as typical behavior of a jealous man dilutes the severity of the crime and its true nature. Lebanese media standards do not classify this act as a crime, nor do they address it as an expression of patriarchal power and entitlement. This framing not only attenuates violence against women but also conditions and socializes young women to expect this behavior in their relationships with men, equating abuse with love. Further, the report invoked pity for the enamored husband, exhausted by the mere thought of his wife with another man, instead of inciting indignation regarding his crime.

¹² Although there isn't a single definition for the term, "toxic masculinity" is operationally used to describe a group of norms, attitudes, and actions that are associated with masculinity but pose threats to women, men, children, and society as a whole. The beliefs and behaviors regularly associated with toxic masculinity include but are not limited to misogyny, cis-heteronormativity, chauvinism, the objectification/infantilization of women, and the glorification of violence.

Similarly, news reports addressing the murder of Zeina Kanjo (coverage of this crime spanned around a week) not only featured her husband and killer, but also served as a space for him to justify his crime and express his love for the woman he killed. “I loved her, I was not trying to kill her; I was only trying to silence her,” he repeated in various reports on multiple platforms. In this case too, the woman’s murder was framed as a mere coincidence or a simple typo in an epic love story. Other examples of this type of framing include statements such as “*I killed her by mistake*”, and “*she is my whole life*” that these men repeated across different platforms – be it talk shows or news reports – with little to no questioning from the host/reporter concerning the murderer’s or attempted murderer’s intentions. This lax media approach to a murder case took an unprecedented turn in one of the reports where a phone call with the murderer – technically a fugitive in hiding – was recorded and released on the air. In this recording, the man sounded confident and reassured, to the extent that he interrupted the reporter when she asked him why he killed his wife, to correct her: “Don’t say that I killed her Zahraa!”¹³

The Lebanese media coverage of crimes against women – namely murder – consistently perpetuates the myth that men kill their wives out of love, reinforcing the notion of “passion crimes” and normalizing violence. Relatedly, as the media also started covering custody battles more frequently over the past few years, “granting” women custody of their children was similarly framed as a gracious gesture from the man towards his divorcee. During a live segment from Ghina Al-Bayat’s lawyer’s office, a friend of her husband was interviewed.¹⁴ The friend confidently announced that the baby was back with her mother because “Rabih (the husband) decided to give her back, and not because lawyers and the media interfered.” This statement went unchallenged, without any comment or question from any of the individuals present, even the influential reporter who claims to support women’s rights, and who played a major role in bringing Al-Bayat’s custody battle into the limelight. If there was one statement that summarizes the core of women’s predicament in Lebanon, according to the coverage of gender-based violence by various television shows in the country, it is this: **Women’s rights – when protection from domestic/intimate partner violence, or child custody are concerned – are exclusively granted by the will of the man/husband, and not by the power of the law.**

Liliane Sheaito was severely injured in the Beirut blast (August 2020) and remained in a coma for over a year. During the first few months following her injury, her husband prevented their son from visiting her at the hospital or seeing her, except for a limited number of times via video call. Although Lilian’s family filed a lawsuit at the Jaafari court against the husband to enforce Lilian’s visitation right, the final decision allowed Sheaito only four hours per day of visitation. This frail court decision was not even applied because the husband and his family simply refused to implement it.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9zT2JTGZs>

The media coverage of Al-Bayat’s custody battle clearly exemplifies how women who are fighting for the custody of their children are consistently framed as incompetent or as minors whose opinions do not

¹³ The name of the reporter who conducted the interview with Kanjo’s husband is Zahraa Fardon.

¹⁴ <https://youtu.be/gS2gz8guKAo>

count – even though the case in question concerns their own children. During the live segment at Al-Bayat’s lawyer’s office, the reporter addressed the woman, in an explicitly patronizing tone: “you promise that you will now dedicate your time to taking care of your child?” That same condescending approach repeats itself in Liliane Sheaito’s custody battle. Sheaito had been in a coma since the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020; her parents were forced to resort to campaigning through social media in order to prevent the husband from taking her two-year old child outside the country without their consent. In an interview with Sheaito’s husband who lives in Nigeria, renowned media celebrity – dubbed champion of women and children’s rights – Joe Maalouf asked him whether he truly refused that the child visits his mother at the hospital, to which the husband replied: “No, there’s no problem.”¹⁵ Time and again, questions framing a woman’s basic right – in this case her right to see her child – as one requiring her husband’s permission further not only entrenches the principle that women’s rights are only granted to them if and when their husbands allow it, but also reinforces and celebrates toxic masculinity norms and practices.

- **Breaching the victim’s privacy, paving the way for incriminating and blaming her**

The coverage of several of the previously mentioned cases, particularly the coverage of the murder of pharmacist Leila Rizk, featured discussions about the victim’s “good relationships and reputation” with all her neighbors. This not only assumes that her murder is connected to her “reputation,” but also normalizes a discourse that allows for victim blaming and gives a sense of voyeurism onto the victim’s life.

News reports and segments of talk shows that cover murder of or violations against women delve into the lives of these women with an appetite for scandal, voyeuristically exposing details of their private lives without any constructive purpose. **During the live segment on Ghina Al-Bayat’s custody battle, details of her psychological state, her suicidal tendencies, and her history of rescuing animals to “compensate for affection,” were unnecessarily disclosed. Similarly, the reports covering Zeina Kanjo’s murder dwelled significantly on her modeling career, her family disputes, and “the quality of her friends,” instead of revolving around her husband and killer’s absolute impunity. Some of the news reports on Kanjo’s murder focused on her beauty and elaborated on her relationships with her friends, paving the way for her husband to accuse them of turning her against him, thus indirectly suggesting that she was responsible for her own murder. The reporters’ misplaced investigative spirit and their insistent pursuit of a hidden angle takes viewers to the world of soap operas and reality television.**

A year after **Lara Shaaban** had left her marital house because of alleged domestic violence, her husband, Samer S., attempted to kill her, in an ambush, with a gun, a knife, an incendiary spray, and brass knuckles. Reportedly, Shaaban had previously filed a lawsuit for divorce in the Jaafari court. However, Shaaban’s husband refused to divorce, and filed in return a lawsuit to force Shaaban back home after she moved with her two-year old daughter to her mother’s house. Less than a year later (February 2021), he tried to kill her.

¹⁵ Following at least four

in favor of Lilian and her family to see the child for at husband and his family refuse to implement the ruling.

Reports addressing the attempted murder of Lara Shaaban followed an identical logic. One of the televised reports featured Lara's lawyer attesting that Lara and her husband had "common and simple marital problems," implicitly dismissing the severity of violence that she had to endure, and normalizing violence as an expected approach to "common and simple marital issues." This five-minute news report hardly discussed the slow judicial processes in divorce and alimony cases. Similarly, the reporter barely addressed the husband's toxicity, entitlement, and his refusal to divorce his wife as well as his neglect of his daughter. In the same logic, all reports covering the custody battle of Liliane Sheaito did not fail to mention that she had a loving relationship with her husband, and that when she was hurt by the Beirut blast, she was shopping for a birthday present for him.¹⁶ **Despite the fact that there were no apparent tensions in the case of Sheaito and her husband, the framing of most of the reports about the case suggests that "marital tensions" can potentially grant husbands the right to deny their wives or their families a basic right such as seeing their children.** It also paves the way for accepting that some scenarios of conflict between spouses naturally lead to measures such as depriving a mother of her child or murdering her.

- **Normalizing crimes against women as a regular practice**

A couple of days after Zeina Kanjo's murder, the introduction of a news bulletin resorted to a play on words – a practice for which the editorial policy of this channel is known for – comparing Kanjo's disputes with her husband to those between the president of the republic and the prime minister. **Thus, in a mere four minutes, the murder of a young woman at the hands of her husband was reduced to the monotony of the continuous senseless bickering between politicians, transforming her tragic death into just another chapter of political insignificance, and material for trivial verbal acrobatics.**

Not only are the crimes committed against women framed as common and regular practices, likened to the frivolities of Lebanese politics, but the impunity of the men who commit these crimes is similarly normalized. During a live phone interview with Kanjo's husband and murderer, the man did not hesitate to give his full address while the screen showed a map pinning his location. "I am not a fugitive. I want to tell you my side of the story," hence leaving the scene and showing up on his own terms and of his own accord. It seemed like the crime that he committed and the woman he killed were not worthy of a discussion, but were considered to be a minor detail compared to what the man "has to say," or his opinion, on the murder. That same man appeared again on another television channel – on the day that he had specifically requested – to command audiences to "consider the important and urgent matters," and refrain from "straying far from the real issue" and from "throwing accusations left, right, and center."

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9zT2JTGZs>

With that same arrogance and sense of entitlement, both Rabih (Ghina Al-Bayat's husband) and Hassan (Liliane Sheaito's husband) proceeded to inform the audiences that they have gracefully granted their wives a few hours a week to see their children. "I gave her the girl because I wanted to," says Rabih in one report, resultantly becoming – along with Hassan – the exception to the reality of thousands of women deprived of their children by the sectarian courts. The media has therefore continuously portrayed such men as "kind and merciful" compared to the legal and political authorities and structures that control women's right to the custody of their children, thus contributing – perhaps unintentionally – to the normalization with said authorities.

- **Promoting "individual" solutions to violence against women, without addressing structural factors and institutions**

During the live episode with Al-Bayat and her lawyer, the lawyer explicitly attributed the "success of the case" and the newborn's return to her mother's arms to the media. This statement was insulting, not only because it neglects the role and engagement of the women's movement, activists, and campaigns that boldly broke the silence around the injustices of religious courts towards women, but also because it implicitly dismisses the necessity to address these structures, and underplays the need for radical and systemic change in these courts. Why would activists and organizations bother with long-term arduous work to shift structures, when rights can be attained through talk-shows and social media?

Repeatedly showcasing the media as the pathway to claim self-evident rights such as child custody and framing this as the only way a woman can attain a fraction of justice, leads the public to slowly and systematically start losing interest in harder, more complex battles such as amending custody laws, or adopting a civil personal status law. If one episode with Joe Maalouf proves enough to return a child to their mother, then why should feminists exhaust themselves demanding structural change? In fact, resorting to the media for quick fixes not only remains an exceptional luxury attainable by only a select few women, but the intense exposure of both the mother and the child to the media leads to long-term psychological damage, as it opens their lives to brutal public scrutiny. **The approach of most media, news reporters, and shows' hosts is often sensationalist, with a hint of voyeurism into women's private lives in desperate attempts for higher viewership ratings. As such, this programming often refrains from truly confronting the oppressive institutions responsible for denying women their rights.**

- **Continuously tying crimes against women to other issues and diluting gender-based aspects**

The linking between murders of women and various sociopolitical issues framed as "broader and more political", strongly appeared in two recent crimes against women in Lebanon. The "Ansar Crime" that took the lives of four women – a mother and her three daughters – in March 2022 in the southern Lebanese town of Ansar, is an example of the ways that the media attempts to dilute gender-based violence by linking crimes to different sociopolitical issues or agendas. When the news first broke out about this crime, reports hinted at "possible links" between the crime and a network of human organs traffickers. However, as soon as the bodies were found and sent for forensic inspection, it quickly became clear that there were no organs missing, and that the bodies remained intact. Soon after the launch of the investigation into the crime, another theory emerged linking the two murderers to a

network of illicit archaeological traffickers between Syria and Lebanon. While credible and well-known investigative journalists followed the case, and eventually announced that the crime was “purely driven by patriarchal motives,” news websites continued to frame the crime as somehow related to the illicit trafficking of antiquities between Lebanon and Syria.

Similarly, the investigation into the murder of pharmacist Leila Rizk followed the same route. It started with news channels hosting the President of the Order of Pharmacists Joe Salloum, hours after discovering Rizk’s body, to demand stricter curfews on Syrian refugees in Lebanese towns. While Salloum did not reveal the identity of the criminal – there was no guaranteed way to know as the body was only discovered hours ago – he implied that the criminal was a Syrian refugee. Salloum’s racist claims followed a string of similar statements tying crimes to the high influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, thus fueling hate against an entire marginalized population in Lebanon. Perpetuating this racist narrative in the context of this crime not only demonizes a whole community, but also dilutes gender-based violence and crimes committed against women into a “bigger cause”. The slaughter of Rizk, a pharmacist in her workplace in broad daylight was never considered a gender-based crime, rather it was seen as a chapter in the fight between two communities – the Syrian refugee community and the Lebanese host community. This narrative persisted throughout the days and weeks after the crime, but eventually took on an additional layer. **What started as a crime tied to the threat that Syrian refugees posed to the safety and wellbeing of Lebanese neighborhoods, later transformed into a manifestation of the lack of safety of pharmacists in light of the crisis of medicine shortages that overwhelmed the country at the time (2021-2022).**

The downplaying of the gendered aspect of Leila Rizk’s murder did not stop there. It also colored the results of the investigation which came out more than three months after the murder. The report by the security forces revealed the identities of the murderers without any details, and without explaining neither the process that the investigation took, nor the motives behind the crime. It turns out that one of the murderers is a “Syrian with a criminal record of theft and other felonies” and a young man “with mental retardation and intellectual disabilities who visited the victim’s pharmacy frequently,” according to the statement issued by the Internal Security Forces announcing the results of the investigation in June 2022. The media did not probe the conclusion of the case, nor did it question the investigation process, despite early site inspection reports confirming that no items or money were stolen from the pharmacy. To this date, there has been no media follow-up on this case.

- **Crossing the line from objectification into the commodification of women’s suffering**

This section focuses on the show *Fawq el 18* and its host Rabia Al-Zayat. To begin with, the name of the show – which translates to “over 18” – is quite telling. The name alone connotes a sense of suspense that the host wants to build among the audience and insinuates a sexual – almost pornographic – and taboo undertone, as 18 is the internationally recognized age of consent. This becomes incredibly problematic given the show’s frequent focus on what are actual serious social and political issues related to human rights and gender equality. The format and settings of the show – seating two groups of people across from each other and pitting them against each other – contributes to the polarization of

the discussion (between a group that advocates for child marriage for instance, and another that argues against it) to the point where the heated discussions and the intense bickering end up sensationalizing crucial and pressing matters that affect the lives of thousands. This polarization and the host's frequent interjections, which only serve to further agitate both parties, not only sensationalize critical issues around women's rights, gender identity and expression, and sexuality, but also diverts the attention and interest of the audience from the actual issue at hand (domestic violence, transgender individuals, etc.) towards the conflict happening between participants. In the process of reframing the issue of domestic violence – namely the “beating of wives” – as just another perspective in a controversial debate, one episode of the show featured participants and guests whose contributions to the “debate” consisted of jokes about how they beat their wives, and which part of a woman's body it is socially acceptable to beat. By allowing this conversation to happen on air, and by moderating these discussions, the host not only trivializes these issues, but also systematically turns women's suffering into material for comedy.

Also, the heated debate that leads to participants speaking over one another often results in them making inaccurate, incorrect, essentializing, and sexist assumptions or claims that pass unnoticed and more importantly, remain uncorrected to millions of viewers that tune into every episode. This points to the sensationalism that television shows treat these issues with, commodifying their suffering and taking a voyeuristic approach to the violation of their rights.

Interestingly, unlike all the episodes of the show's two seasons, the final episode of the show's second season was an interview with make-up artist Samer Khuzami.¹⁷ The interview was one of the few rare occasions where Al-Zayat, the host, failed to throw agitating statements and assumptions, and to corner her guest. In Al-Zayat's words, she hosted Khuzami to discuss “why he is different.” This clear statement only validates her approach to her interviewee, which is outright othering. During the episode, Al-Zayat insisted on branding Khuzami as a homosexual despite his explicit refusal to answer her repetitive questions on his sexual orientation. The interview was loaded with essentialist claims about women, men, transgender individuals, and the LGBTIQ community, and was centered around the host's preoccupation with a constructed duality of “natural” vs “non-natural” or “different,” and the conflation of gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. However, if this interview was the epitome of backlash against gender justice in the media, then Khuzami's performance and answers were an expression of pushback against this backlash. His answers to Zayat's prying questions, along with his art, are manifestations of his resistance to the backlash against him and against what he represents, representing his struggle with the patriarchal society embodied by hosts like Al-Zayat and shows like *Fawq el-18*.

4. Conclusion

¹⁷ Samer Khuzami is a renowned Lebanese makeup artist. He has developed his own cosmetic brand “Samer Khuzami Cosmetics” and has shops and points of sales around Lebanon and in several countries across the Arab world. He also provides training to new makeup artists through his own “Samer Khuzami academy.”

This case study started with a contextual definition of backlash in Lebanon, that the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) has put together collaboratively with feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts. As opposed to framing backlash as a violent or hostile **reaction or response** to progress made within and/or by the women's movement, the hostility experienced by women in Lebanon in all spheres is pervasive, structural, and embedded in the very systems that make up their families, communities, and state. The AiW's definition thus defines backlash as ***"the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion- across time and generations- that cut through governmental, non-governmental, media, and familial institutions; and that are fed, incubated, and fueled by the sectarian system; and that not only prevent and hinder rights-based initiatives and advocacy, but also fight the possibility of progress and the acquisition of feminist gains."***

The media's approach to the crimes against women discussed here testifies to the pervasiveness of violence against women in Lebanon, and unpacks the various ways in which Lebanese talk shows and news reports perpetuate, normalize, and reinforce this backlash against women and their rights, rather than question or challenge it.

Hence, with the tactics that these reports and shows employ while discussing gender-based violence and murder, the media in Lebanon serves as a fundamental site of this structural hostility against women's rights. The different discourses used to discuss outright acts of gender-based violence, often amounting to murder, both perpetuate and distract the public from structural backlash, which is embedded in the very system that makes up Lebanese law and society.

These talk shows and reports relegated to the backburner – throughout the coverage of all the cases mentioned - the real issues at hand such as the need for a unified personal status law, and stronger protections for women within the domestic violence law. **Further, by choosing to focus on the specifics of each case – the mental health of the victim or the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, or by giving perpetrators a platform to justify their crimes, the media in Lebanon has actively served to maintain the status quo of women, and functioned as a main site where backlash against their rights is consistently reproduced.**

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