

Lebanon : Thoughts on the Left and its position towards women

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I was supposed to write about class liberation and its relationship with social liberation, but I found it more critical, at this point, to write about the relationship between the Left and the issues of women, from a personal perspective connected with my own experiences.

Since the beginning, I considered myself among the ranks of the Left. It inspired me, throughout my life, on everything that had to do with justice, liberation and a better world. My experience with the Left was a romantic one, to begin with, with passionate nostalgia of Beirut in the 70s - its art and way of life. In 2006, I felt I had found my way to a leftist organization, through which I learned that there is hope outside of the Communist Party which never, even for a single day, convinced me or drew me towards it.

Everything seemed logical then, full of revolution and justice. Each passing day, I felt a growing class consciousness, one that took me back time and again to the past only to look at it differently, in a way full of adrenaline and the sense of the inevitability of success. I started reading more. Whether through the meetings that we held, which revolved around the class struggle and capitalism, or through the events and statements that would transmit this consciousness among the ranks of the working class, or through closely following workers' strikes and demonstrations, or the readings that we committed ourselves to. I felt that this organization influenced the development of my own consciousness.

However, we were an organization that was in constant contact and communication with the Lebanese Communist Party, which was considered the bigger block that "represents the Left," as it carries a long legacy of struggling against the many economic policies produced by the different regimes. This is in addition to the legacy of resistance expressed through the National Resistance Front in fighting back against occupation and the Israeli enemy, as well as confronting the ultra-right that attempted to destroy the Palestinian resistance in Lebanon.

While working on specific political issues, such as building a Leftist united front against sectarian alignments, fighting back against the current economic policies, demanding better electricity, or joining the boycott movement, and so on, there were many points where we found ourselves intersecting with the youth base of the Communist Party, the Union of Democratic Youth, and other traditional leftist political formations.

An example was the open sit-in during the war on Gaza in the final months of 2009. I will not go into the details of the complications faced at this sit-in, those that had to do with political positions, the nature of the movement or the democratic mechanisms in place, which had been undermined by parties such as the Communist Party (a closer reading of this experience can be found in the pages of al-Manshour). However, I would like to bring to the forefront the question of women through the dynamics I experienced while interacting with political parties that harbor a massive amount of sexism and homophobia.

For many like me, the daily context was rife with difficulty. This especially had to do with the overall atmosphere of our daily interactions and communications. It was enough for a man who does not conform to the normative and hegemonic construct of the 'strong man' to pass by, for the jokes and laughter to break out, and this with comments on the need to distance "these people" from the demonstration.

This daily interaction was no different from the patriarchal society that surrounds us. These shared spaces reflect, in a sense, these defined gender roles, with their sharp distinctions, through seeing women as primarily sexual objects and therefore weak and dependent. It was clear that for the present mentalities, there was no acceptance for the fact that women have their own sexual lives, which influenced many men to believe that any woman who makes clear the ownership of her body and her liberation must be available to all of them. She is thus continually harassed. Throughout the entire time of the sit-in, I did not see a single woman moderating a meeting or deciding what needs to be done, with the exception of the group that I belonged to. The other parties and political groups initiated committees and positioned their men as sole leaders.

The case of 'The Downfall of the Sectarian Regime' campaign

It is not enough to break the silence on sexist practices present in society. What is more difficult is breaking this silence within the circles that themselves claim to struggle against sexism, for, as they claim, this matter is somehow obviously self-evident. In this spirit, I find it critical to highlight practices that show everyday sexism and institutionalized political sexism, which emerged from the public meetings of the 'Downfall of the Sectarian Regime' campaign, last year.

On a daily basis, men are routinely the 'masters of the situation,' with their loud voices and imposing bodies, pushing with all their strength to occupy the frontlines. This stampede was, in itself, the aim. As a woman, you have two choices : either join the stampede until you appear in the picture and here you might be run over and squashed, or you calmly retreat, get as far away as possible from the situation, and watch from the margins. The campaign did not deny women's participation, of course, and gave space for us to be organizers, but this did not go as smoothly as we expected.

In one instance, for example, one of the leaders of the Communist Party threatened one woman, and was about to hit her because he was "provoked" by her request to stand behind the banner, which the Campaign collectively decided to be at the very front of the demonstration. The Campaign did not find it necessary to reflect on this issue because, it seems, the issue at hand was not revolutionary enough for them. It was not enough for this man to stampede over women in the demonstrations, but he also found for himself an outlet within the meetings. Survival of the fittest was the prevailing formula ; he who raises his voice the loudest and imposes himself the most is the one who talks. Any kind of gender equity was decidedly forbidden in the meetings, from moderating the meetings to changing sexist behaviors, which pushed many (male and female) to the fringes of presenting an opinion or even making a contribution.

These practices continued within the meeting. Once, we suggested that women be at the front of a demonstration, as the march called for a unified personal status law for all citizens and insisting on equality for all. This suggestion was enough to provoke a volcanic eruption within the meeting, where the "leaders" raced against each other to oppose the suggestion, in form and content. But the problem was not in opposing a certain suggestion, knowing that this opposition came from what amounts to nothing more than a sexist standpoint. The opposition also came with the implicit assumptions that this suggestion holds no political dimension, and this is the crux of the problem at hand. It was the surfacing of a certain misogyny, unprecedented in my experience, which manifested

in rejecting putting this suggestion to a vote through threats and ridicule, in addition to seizing and hijacking the moderation of the meeting, as if a crisis situation had been announced. Throughout the constant screaming and shouting, we could not get a single word in. Screams along the lines of : “we are in a revolutionary situation now, and have no time to discuss such an inane issue”, as Mazen Hoteit said, one of the official representatives of the Communist Party.

In my own experience, organizing with independent (and non-Stalinist) organizations enriched me, and planted within me a consciousness that I do not regret, but cherish. I still consider that the class struggle in society challenges, to a large extent, inequality and the violations that happen within it. But, from another perspective, this approach may have reflected a failure on my part - these spaces did not enrich my gender consciousness, as a pivotal issue of great consequence and just as important as class consciousness, and cannot be made part and parcel of “other” struggles that are simply rooted in class inequality.

The problem was not in the organization’s approach towards gender justice, for it was pushing with all its strength towards achieving this, and intervening with heated arguments with left-wing reactionary forces, which still consider women as ‘minors’ to be taken care of, recipients of harassment, and an entity available for men to prove their virility. It is a problem of space. One that lies in everyday political practice and in relational dynamics within political organizations. And maybe I would not be writing these thoughts if I had not collided, time and again, with my own gender, and what that entails in daily struggles, some of them direct, and others implicit, exhausting, and long-term. I considered, for a long time that equality would come about when I dismiss this struggle and rather aim towards a better world where social justice prevails. I used to say to myself that if I wanted to be equal to men, I have to join the stampede, and any consideration of gender is discrimination in and of itself. It was as if we were equal to men and all we had to do was apply this equality.

I never knew how to avoid provoking anyone in a discussion, when I wanted to express my opinion as a woman, without discriminating against men, and so I never dared to make this claim except at certain times, too long in between, and have not been able to defend it. When I collided with the concept of gender, I realized it was necessarily political and not a marginal issue. Feminist consciousness for me is a return to concepts of women, silenced for far too long, their ways of resolving conflict, and their way of resisting patriarchy. It is a return to maternal systems and beliefs, a different way of expressing and communicating that we women, or men, can draw from, see its usefulness, and judge or, at least, listen to women when they express the need for something, within these types of organizations.

On the other hand, the history of women teaches me to unite with them for objective reasons that have shaped our reactions, the extent of our acceptance or silencing, or our participation in public space, which may be in a meeting, for example. This may be due to a perception of women as weak or victims. However, for example, when a woman speaks in a public space, men need to reconsider the idea that public space is theirs, the space where they grew up throughout the decades, and the dynamics are the ones that they created, alone. This approach may be applied, sometimes, to the most minute of details. Marxism will not be hurt if women spoke of urgent political matters that affect them and if male comrades listened.

There is no option for the Left if it seeks to represent all of society, except to move forward towards re-alignment with women’s issues, especially in light of the revolutions that pose new configurations for the struggle and shows us, in clear sight, that there is no room for sexist or racist thinking among us or in the society we wish to build. Of more importance is that there are no ‘revolutionary priorities’ or phases of struggle at the expense of others. Many are the masks that are used today, but there is some hope. It is those voices that have been raised from the ground that call for the end

of dictatorship and military rule, the end of virginity tests and sexual harassment. It is a revolutionary moment that we must not forfeit.

Hiba Abbani

P.-S.

* <http://al-manshour.org/node/6724>

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