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# Reframing the war on terror: Feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activism in the context of the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon

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## Abstract

This article seeks to expand the kinds of questions we ask about the diverse militarized campaigns referred to collectively as the “war on terror,” the grassroots resistance to these wars, and efforts committed to creating a world without destruction and killing. Shifting the focus of this feminist critique of war away from the center of power (the empire) to the everyday lives of feminist and queer activists living the war on terror from the ground up, this article examines a distinct feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social movement that worked to respond to and resist the US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006. We argue along with our interlocutors in Lebanon that asymmetrical systems of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and family are entangled in the historical conditions of transnational capital, empire, and war, and necessitate an intersectional approach that refuses to impose false binaries or hierarchies on a complex social reality. We conclude by arguing the importance of reframing the war on terror and reimagining feminist and LGBTQ policies as a critique of the post-racial discourse, beyond dominant imperialist and nationalist discourses, which are exclusionary, sexist, and homophobic in different ways.

## Keywords

Activism, intersectionality, Israel, Lebanon, queer, war, women’s movement

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## Introduction

This article seeks to expand the kinds of questions we ask about the diverse militarized campaigns referred to collectively as the “war on terror,” the grassroots resistance to these wars, and efforts committed to creating a world without destruction and killing. A growing body of feminist scholarship has established the ways in which the US-led war on terror works through heteropatriarchal, classist, and imperialist discourses and practices (Abdulhadi et al., 2010; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2008; Alsultany, 2012; Amireh, 2010; Elia, 2011; Jarmakani, 2008; Naber, 2008; Riley et al., 2008; Zaatari, 2011). Shifting the focus of this feminist critique of war away from the center of power (the empire) to the everyday lives of feminist and queer activists living the war on terror from the ground up, this article examines a distinct feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social movement that worked to respond to and resist the US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006.

The 2006 Israeli invasion and its aftermath provided a heightened moment of political activism in which activists came to articulate a feminist and LGBTQ critique that insisted that concepts and practices of gender and sexuality in Lebanon were shaped within the broader contexts of US and Israeli imperial war and the interrelated Lebanese state structures of sectarianism, classism, and racism. Mapping our engagements with heteropatriarchy at the intersections of war, sectarianism, classism, and racism, this article also maps the contours of an intersectional, anti-imperialist feminist analysis of the war on terror from the ground up. We argue along with our interlocutors that asymmetrical systems of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and family are entangled in the historical conditions of transnational capital, empire, and war and necessitate an intersectional approach that refuses to impose false binaries or hierarchies on a complex social reality. In the totalizing discourses of terrorists versus democrats, the liberated West versus the oppressive East, the complexity and co-constitutive nature of systems of oppression and the stories of struggle and resistance tend to be marginalized. Mapping the contours of a feminist and LGBTQ critique of the war on terror is crucial for moving the framing of the war on terror beyond dominant imperialist and nationalist discourses, which both are exclusionary, sexist, and homophobic in different ways.

Developing such a feminist/LGBTQ critique is also essential precisely because of the framing of the war on terror’s militarized campaigns using post-racial discourse—a totalizing discourse that masks the intersection of multiple forms of oppression through a discourse and logic of obliteration and binarism (with us or against us). Communities threatened by militarized crises respond with the logic of emergency that inadvertently colludes with this campaign to flatten out social complexity and marginalize those whose experiences do not “fit” in binarized political hierarchies.

Since 2004, a new generation of feminist and LGBTQ activists has formed various organizations and collectives in Lebanon. These activists refer to their work as grassroots and revolutionary, in one way or another. While distinct, their work, considered together, can be said to constitute a new feminist and LGBTQ social movement in Lebanon. Our research set out to explore the concepts of family, gender, and sexuality that circulate in this movement within the broader context of military invasion, civil conflict, and the politics of a nation-state structured by heteropatriarchy, sectarianism, classism, and

racism. During the 2006 invasion, many of our interlocutors were involved in organizing among feminist, LGBTQ, and other progressive organizations, coalitions, and political parties.

This article is based upon research conducted among nine activists specifically involved in the following organizations and collectives: Meem, Helem, and Nasawiya/the Feminist Collective and its journal, *Sawt Al Niswa*. Meem is a community of and for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women and transgender people (<http://www.meem-group.org>) that was founded in 2007. Its precursor was the short-lived Helem Girls, which found lesbian and queer women in need of their own space. Helem is an LGBTQ nongovernmental organization (NGO) whose acronym in Arabic stands for “Lebanese Protection for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgenders” (<http://www.helem.net>). Helem was founded in 2004 and has done tremendous work on issues of HIV/AIDS and legal reform. Nasawiya or the Feminist Collective had several starts in 2007, 2008, and, finally most visibly, in 2009. It is “a group of young feminists who are working together to recreate a world free from sexism, and all other forms of exploitations and discriminations that collaborate with it: classism, heterosexism, racism, capitalism, etc ...” (<http://www.nasawiya.org>). It does so through a diversity of strategies including producing an electronic publication titled *Sawt Al Niswa* (Voice of Women; <http://www.sawtalniswa.com>). In 2012, *Sawt Al Niswa* became its own independent entity collaborating with but not part of Nasawiya. Many interlocutors are involved in other left-leaning organizations such as Hizb Al Qawmi Al Sury Al Ijtima’i (the Syrian Social Nationalist Party) and the Assembly for Change. While Meem<sup>1</sup> and Nasawiya had not yet been formed at the time of the 2006 invasion, the activists who later founded them were engaged in groups like Helem<sup>2</sup>, Helem Girls,<sup>3</sup> and the Social Movement. Around the time of the invasion, left-leaning young people had been critiquing the elitism of many Lebanese feminist organizations and refusing to allow the NGO funding structure to define their work.

In general, our interlocutors’ work in their feminist and LGBTQ organizations took up a range of interconnected issues, most often through a feminist and/or LGBTQ perspective. Rasmiya<sup>4</sup> indicated that Nasawiya, for example, is “inclusive so it helps the individual to join for one cause but to also be exposed to other causes,” to take a position on other causes. Murad admired in Nasawiya the fact that

[t]here was a good level of understanding and correspondence or linking to other issues beyond feminism, like class issues, war, sexuality and even issues of the region. Of Sectarianism, civil marriage, what’s going on in Palestine, the status of refugees in Lebanon including Palestinians, Iraqis, Sudanese, and different types of refugees. As well as racism against Syrians, against migrant workers whether from East Asian countries or from Africa.

In this sense, our interlocutors consider their work as nonconformist on multiple fronts. Rasmiya explained,

At the time we also tried not to be too traditional, we tried to reconsider all forms of organizing. So in a sense it helped us think of power dynamics, it helped us think of what makes a group weaker or stronger, how can we get everyone involved and help them feel that

they have a role to play and not just that they are here to do what the big boss wants them to do, or something like that.

Our research employs a methodology grounded in social movement accountability, which entails conducting research in relationship to the social movements that are relevant to the lives, dreams, and visions of our research participants.<sup>5</sup> Our approach to accountability has entailed (1) involving activists from these organizations in the research, (2) coauthoring our research findings so that the authors include both an insider (Zeina) and an outsider (Nadine) to this movement, and (3) considering our research participants “interlocutors” or critics and theorists on their own terms with whom we have collaboratively developed the analysis in this article. The activists we worked with are from families that have a range of political affiliations (among and within their families). Their socioeconomic and religious positions and affiliations are also diverse. Some interlocutors were directly impacted by the political conflicts of 2006 and some were not. What brings them together is a shared sense of outrage over a wide range of social injustices and the desire for an anti-imperialist social justice agenda in Lebanon that does not compromise struggles to end sexism and homophobia.

In the following pages, we will first outline the events of the 2006 invasion of Lebanon and the kinds of dominant narratives used to justify it. We will then present a discussion on how the invasion and militarization had ushered in a logic of emergency that foreclosed feminist and LGBTQ politics and analysis. In this section, we address the reign of “the family” and sectarianism and the roles they play in hegemonic discourses and practices. We then move to highlighting some of the new possibilities and opportunities that these chaotic moments may present for feminist and LGBTQ activism highlighting intersectionality as a strategy and practice. We conclude by arguing the importance of reframing the war on terror and reimagining feminist and LGBTQ policies as a critique of the post-racial discourse. We insist, along with our interlocutors that far from being superfluous or even “luxurious” concerns during moments of crisis—as *post-racial discourse would have us believe*—the experiences and critiques of feminist/LGBTQ activists are *all the more important* for they reveal precisely what the logic of emergency and the discourse of terror would seek to suppress: just how densely interwoven different relations of oppression are and how the false hierarchies they construct serve to pit various groups, identities, and experiences against one another in a constructed competition for “priority.”

## The 2006 war on Lebanon: Imperialism intensified

On 12 July 2006, the US-backed Israeli army launched a massive attack on Lebanon in an aim to destroy Hizbullah and the general possibility of resistance against Israel in Lebanon. Many feared that the incursion into Lebanon by Israeli ground troops signaled the reemergence of a proxy entity as a buffer.<sup>6</sup> In 1 month, the Israeli army had destroyed all of the key bridges and overpasses in the country, all three runways of Beirut’s international airport, roads, power plants, cell phone towers, and factories. The attack killed more than 1200 civilians (50% were children), wounded 4400, and displaced over a million (a quarter of the population)<sup>7</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 2007).<sup>8</sup> It destroyed Lebanon’s

infrastructure, including bridges (97), roads (151), ports, airport, factories, power stations, schools (715 public and private), and hospitals, and caused major pollution of its shores through 15,000 tons of oil spill from the bombing of a power plant. Israel razed to the ground whole neighborhoods and villages, including more than 100,000 housing units. In the last 72 hours of the war and after United Nations (UN) Resolution 1701 had already been agreed to, Israel fired “1,800 cluster rockets containing 1.2 million submunitions” (Nash, 2006),<sup>9</sup> constituting about 90% of the total of cluster bombs fired onto Lebanon. Years later, cluster bombs continue to add to the death and injured toll of the war and add to the growing number of physically disabled population of the South. There was indeed a humanitarian disaster in Lebanon. The UN and NGOs were not able to supply people with resources since all of the major roads in the South were hit and most major entry points including ports and Syria/Lebanon border points were targeted. Ambulances could barely operate; food, gas, and clean drinking water were running out; and on 5 August, the Lebanese Minister of Health reported that hospitals would lose all access to fuel within a week. Throughout this period, Hizbullah fighters continued to respond by firing rockets into Israel and resisting the ground troops that entered Lebanon in the South.

US and Israeli leaders justified the invasion through the racialized-gendered discourse of Arab Muslim terrorists threatening Israeli security which constructed Lebanon as a center of terrorism in the Middle East along with Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Countries and entities that stood in the way of the US empire building project in the Arab and Muslim regions<sup>10</sup> came to be shrouded with the cloak of the “war on terror.” Ultimately, the US and Israeli discourse of the war on terror has birthed a variety of widely accepted ideas: of Arab and Muslim Queers oppressed by a homophobic culture and religion, of hyper-oppressed shrouded Arab and Muslim women who need to be saved by American heroes, and of a culture of Arab Muslim sexual savagery that needs to be disciplined—and, in the process, modernized—through US military violence (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Puar, 2007; Razack, 2005; Shakhsari, 2012).<sup>11</sup> Using the attacks of 11 September 2001 as a justification, this racialized-gendered discourse blamed the Lebanese for violence and depicted them as uncivilized terrorists, compared to Israelis who were apparently defending peace, democracy, and security. This discourse lined up with US policy, which failed to support an early cease-fire despite pressure from the majority of the world, legitimized Israeli actions as self-defense against “Muslim terrorists,” and marked people who criticized the invasion as supporters of terrorism. At first, the justification focused on Hizbullah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers. As the invasion continued and it was no longer convincing to justify the destruction of Lebanon as a means to free two soldiers, the United States and Israel justified this war through the rhetoric of fighting “Muslim terrorists” who are full of hate and evil and want to destroy Israel. Central to the reduction of Lebanese resistance to “terrorism,” dominant US discourses omit references to the historical conditions that produced Hizbullah thus limiting any discussion of the invasion to a question over whether or not one “supports terrorism.”<sup>12</sup> Within this framing, critiques of the invasion (whether or not such critiques entail support for Hizbullah) become traitors to civilization and democracy and supporters of terror. Indeed, the Obama administration continues to reduce the complex social and political realities in the Arab region to a conflict between “Islamic extremists” and the

forces of freedom and democracy (the United States, Israel, and their supporters in the Arab region).

Intersectional, postcolonial, and transnational feminist theories have established that family, gender, and sexuality are shaped by and in relation to structural inequalities such as militarism (such as colonization and war), racism, and classism. Within these research areas, scholars writing on militarism have established that militarism and structures of family, gender, and sexuality work intersectionally, shaping and constituting each other. Moreover, this literature illustrates that militarism, family, gender, and sexuality as well as structures of race, class, and nation also constitute one another (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Enloe, 2007; Kuttab and Johnson, 2001; Riley et al., 2008; Shohat, 2001). Yet, beyond scholarship on Palestine, there remains a lack of feminist research and virtually no queer studies-based research related to the ways communities are forced to engage with contemporary manifestations of militarism and war in the Arab region on the ground. Our interlocutors' stories update postcolonial, transnational, and intersectional feminist studies with the new realities of Israeli settler-colonialism and US-led empire in the Arab region and their local consequences in Lebanon. Our research participants' stories about the 2006 war in Lebanon show how concepts and practices of family, gender, and sexuality are shaped and impacted by various forms of structural violence including classism, sectarianism, racism, and militarism, and these same forms of structural violence were defined by concepts of family, gender, and sexuality.

## **The logic of emergency: Foreclosing feminist and LGBTQ politics**

It is obvious that Israeli state violence had a direct impact on nearly all Lebanese, with varied impacts across class, gender, and geographic location. There is no question that women, men, children, queers, Christians, Muslims, Druze, atheists, rich, and poor were outraged over the invasion to different degrees and with different responses. It is also obvious, contrary to liberal Eurocentric sexuality studies frameworks, that sexuality was not always the determining factor in our interlocutors' lives—especially when faced with military violence and war. The question then is not why the invasion mattered to feminist and LGBTQ activists, but how they framed the invasion and its implications as a feminist and LGBTQ cause. Our interlocutors were expanding the frame of conventional feminist and queer politics, arguing that the fight against killing and bodily harm and the destruction of homes, villages, and the country's infrastructure was and is, indeed, a feminist and queer cause.

In conversations with our interlocutors in 2009 and 2010 about the 2006 invasion, several asserted that the invasion created a state of emergency that placed limits on feminist and LGBTQ activism. One activist, Murad, told us,

During war whenever physical safety of people is under threat, the only target you see, or the only target that you set yourself is how you preserve lives. So that's why the work of a number of feminists was to answer to these direct needs of people; that was food, that was shelter, that was hygiene, and that was baby food and diapers. There was no specific action done on the level of sexualities.

In fact, as Gilbert put it, “at the beginning some of us wanted only to focus on gay and lesbian issues, but then ... you’re in the middle of a war.” His pause here is telling of the way in which the situation of immediate crisis and war brings to the fore these latent (or not so latent) hierarchies and priorities. In general, the 2006 invasion limited feminist and LGBTQ work that focused primarily and solely on gender or sexuality. Many interlocutors argue that it seemed like a luxury to demand feminist or LGBTQ concerns during these moments. Murad explained, “I think during war, priorities of people change.” Focus turns to meeting basic needs. Rasmiya emphasized the silences that engulf important issues during war, “the social construct during the war is that everything stops and men sit and theorize in salons, and women shut up.” She added,

as for activism, all forms of activism just stop. Most organizations, in general, stopped their work and opened their offices for displaced people ... It is not acceptable to talk about these things [women’s issues] during the war, they would respond by saying “there’s a war taking place and you are talking about this?!” As for alternative sexualities? Well we’re marginalized any way; the first thing they answer us with is “How can you possibly demand such a thing when all this is happening in the country?” There is no understanding, not just in Lebanon, that the individual has rights even during the war ...

We are going to focus on the two primary and only seemingly paradoxical complexes of discourse and practice that emerged in this state of emergency and that our interlocutors critiqued in important ways: the family and sectarianism. On the surface, a discourse of unity versus a discourse of division, yet both deeply problematic for the ways in which they interacted with a logic of emergency to impose structures of inequality and exclusion and foreclose various forms of politics and critique.

### *The unity of the family*

Perhaps no other institution reflected these tensions more clearly than that of the family. Our interlocutors agree that in Lebanon, they are forced to engage with the heteronormative family structures these social institutions and power structures require but find themselves on the margins of them at the same time. They contend that US (and Israeli) imperial domination and state power in Lebanon for different reasons and to different degrees require and keep intact these social institutions and power structures. The 2006 Israeli invasion helped to intensify the significance of sectarianism and various nationalisms in Lebanon and thus reified heteronormative and patriarchal demands (such as the ideal of heterosexual family and the gender binary).

Interlocutors agreed that both the discourses and practices seeking to affirm “unity” in the face of the invasion were driven by conventional concepts of “family.” Feminist and LGBTQ activists were often forced to work within this framework as there was little room to do anything other than responding to immediate needs such as food, shelter, hygiene, and so on. In everyday life, conventional concepts of family supported a practice in which people worked according to an idealized gender binary and to idealized patriarchal and heterosexual concepts of motherhood and fatherhood. Activists were contending with patriotism and nationalism, concepts that become more pronounced as



war escalates and as each faction in Lebanon claims “they are the true Lebanese, the sovereign, the authentic.” These notions of national identity are constructed through gender binaries, with specific roles for men and women, roles that are based in conventional concepts of family.

Our interlocutors’ activism centered upon deconstructing this gender binary, rooted in the conflation between femininity and female bodies and the ideal of the heteronormative family. Some interlocutors discussed the need to challenge the state and legal definitions of family. Gilbert says,

Well, in terms of family, the problem is that by tradition and law, etc., families have a lot of control over your life. Even if you’re over 18. If you’re under 18, then you are forced to be part of this family. You are their property; they can do whatever they want with you.

Rasmiya added that Lebanese society has very strong prescriptions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood, and gender roles in general:

We live in a society that defines very well what womanhood is, meaning that you must dress in a specific way, you must work in a specific field, within specific times, you have specific responsibilities, once a girl reaches 26-27 years old, she is questioned why she is not married.

Interlocutors articulated critiques of dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity that underpin idealized notions of family, patriarchy, and the gender binary. Gilbert stated, “our definition is that it’s a fake construct that is used to control society; pure and simple.”

Our interlocutors pointed out that the war made patriarchy within political movements and families more and more apparent. For instance, several interlocutors spoke about how it became clear that women were doing half of the work, yet political meetings continued to exclude women. Many activists noted that during the invasion, women had the burden of worrying and caring for families while men were out “celebrating victories.” This was a moment that reinforced the idea that women’s place was in the kitchen, while men and boys were outside fighting war.

Yet, our interlocutors’ relations with their own families were complex; like so many others during the war, they turned to their biological families for support. Activists reflected upon the power of traditional family structures during the period of the invasion, structures that many of them found themselves returning to and/or reifying. For instance, one interlocutor explained that she turned to her biological family to take care of her, not to her feminist family. In reflecting back on 2006, and even though Nasawiya was not yet fully formed, Rasmiya added,

In the end, we were all going back to our families, which were more or less involved in political extremism. I mean, in the end, if anything happens to me, it is not the Feminist Collective that’s going to run to my rescue, my parents will. It was not the Feminist Collective that did everything to put me in school, my parents did. So whatever their political views are, it is my parents who will take care of me, it is my parents that love me.

In fact, interlocutors living in areas directly impacted by the invasion found themselves “all stuck in their homes” during the invasion.

Several interlocutors reflected upon contradictions between their own feminist and LGBTQ ideals and their own embeddedness in what they called traditional concepts of family. The connections to their families are important even when they disagree with these families on political perspectives, notions of how to live one's life, and gender roles within families. Both Layla and Sherine disagreed with their families on multiple areas. For Layla, her family is sectarian while she is staunchly secular, but there is room for disagreements. Gilbert's mother is very sectarian, but during the war in 2006, she still brought food and provided some relief efforts to the families displaced from the South of Lebanon (of a different religious sectarian affiliation than her). In Lebanon, family is very important, particularly due to the confessional political structure and the years of wars including civil wars that have rendered the state ineffective and almost nonexistent. Nesrine put it succinctly by stating that

Family in the traditional sense is the people that you are both with, in the practical sense it is the people that you feel closest to and in the Lebanese sense it's the people that can do you a favor when you need things.

Within the context of the invasion, many activists also developed a class analysis with and through their critique of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Rasmiya understands the extremist beliefs of her family as intimately connected to their disempowerment and class location:

People are extremists when they have no solution. People with second passports, expats in Lebanon, people who have money, all of them left Lebanon in 2006, of course these people are more likely to not care about politics, but as for my family, if the war breaks out we will be under fire, no passport, no money, no nothing. So I understand that they would be extremists.

She added that the warlords that arose during the civil war in Lebanon mostly came from poor background as "this was the only way for them to become rich."

Activists rely on their own families but also work to build other families, alternative families that can support their identities. Our interlocutors define family in multiple ways, challenging rigid definitions that reduce family to a framework based on biological reproduction. They expressed connection and affiliation with families deemed biological, but they also referred to their social and political networks as their family. Nesrine explained,

I think Meem is very much a family in the positive and the negative sense. It's empowering that we're there for each other, and we have family relationships, sort of. Like fatherly relationships and motherly relationships and sibling relationships and sibling jealousy and sibling competition and fatherly protection and motherly anxiety. We have all of these things traditional family relationships within the community that we have built. And I think that's a good thing. Because they're not there by themselves, we're challenging them all the time.

More generally, these activists are redefining family more in terms of security, love, respect, and mutual care than a set of relationships based upon a gender binary and the traditional husband–wife relationship. For Rasmiya, the concept of the family is about

love, mutual care, mutual respect of rights, and the law would come in to protect them in extremes cases, meaning that if there is violence, then the law yes must interfere, same with neglect, in the end society is somehow a family ...

She added, "it doesn't have to be a man and a woman with a son and a daughter and a car and a brick house with a dog barking in front of the house. No one will fit into this definition anyway."

### *Sectarianism: The status quo of Lebanon*

As activists' critiques of the unifying discourses and practices of "family" developed, so did their critique of sectarianism and dominant state-led nationalist binaries. They challenged both government and mainstream media discourses that reinforced sectarian and nationalist tensions. Rasmiya described the intensification of sectarian politics and tensions during the war, particularly evidenced in her community in East Beirut and also in the media. She discussed how most displaced people did not feel welcome and thus did not come to East Beirut areas, opting instead to go as far as Syria or Tripoli instead of stopping in East Beirut. She added, "No one volunteered to help the displaced; I would feel scared if I ever wanted to say that I felt like I wanted to go volunteer my time." The media focused on the sectarian identity of the towns and villages that were shelled and mentioned things like "position of the Christian street or the Sunni street." Yet, while many Lebanese activists have been challenging sectarianism for decades, these activists were going beyond the typical critique that sectarianism is divisive and benefits the United States and Israel.

Sectarianism is one of the important axes of oppression within Lebanese society. The US and Israeli war on terror has fueled sectarian tensions and conflicts and has armed various groups to fight against one another. This is evident in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Yemen, and more recently in Syria. Lebanon's sectarian structure is social and political and impacts all aspects of life. Several of our interlocutors view sectarianism as a key site of struggle not only because it is divisive and because it benefits the imperial project of the United States but also because it is patriarchal and requires compulsory heterosexuality. As Murad said,

And of course, you still have families controlled by religious and sectarian limitations, especially in terms of marriages, so even interfamily relationships are most likely to be influenced by sectarian or religious control. It's not easy, even though taking into consideration this heteronormative family standards, it's not easy to create a family of people from different sects, or from different religions.

Our interlocutors, expanding the feminist critique that sectarianism significantly consolidates the normative demand for endogamous marriage in Lebanon (marrying within one's religious group), contend that sectarianism is patriarchal, homophobic, heteronormative, and classist and reinforces the interests of neocolonialism and empire. Reflecting on the significance of sectarianism to idealized notions of family and heteropatriarchy, Rula spoke of family in these terms:

Well, I think it's a very traditional sort of male-is-head-of-household type of setup, but ... I mean, the family is like the basic unit of social organization. And that also ties into the way the country is socially and politically formed as a sectarian system as well. So it's all very, very interconnected. You have the patriarch as head of the family, you have the *zaim*<sup>13</sup> as head of the sect; each family comes from a certain area that has a certain political affiliation, so it's all very interconnected that way. And I don't think you could talk about family without taking into consideration these particularities in Lebanon.

Nesrine explained,

We have our families' politics in our heads, if you are loyal to your family it means you are loyal to a whole set of things; if you divert from one of them if you like a different political party, if you like someone who is outside your family or if you don't want to get married and have kids you are then seen as challenging not only your family, but your sect as well.

Conversely, as one interlocutor put it, nonconformist sexuality challenges sectarianism, and there are more same-sex couples that come together across sectarian divides than heterosexual couples. Same-sex couples already exist outside the domain of what is accepted and normative, as such transgressing sectarian lines is just one more dimension of that. Heterosexual couples of different sects who decide to marry, for example, face tremendous societal, legal, and familial challenges that they must be willing to overcome to ensure their life together is feasible.

Our interlocutors' stories show how various forms of state violence related to sectarianism and military invasion reinforce pressures for heteronormativity and how neoliberal NGO structures shape and determine definitions of homophobia and patriarchy. From their stories emerges an analysis of the ways sexuality, neoliberalism, militarism, classism, and sectarianism operate intersectionally and simultaneously. By critiquing sectarianism as patriarchal and heteronormative, our interlocutors are contributing to knowledge-making about sectarianism. In this sense, their work does not stop at the point of saying that sexuality is about identity or how people who identify as LGBTQ experience heteropatriarchy. Their work provides insight into the structures of sectarianism and a nuanced look into not only the hierarchical or gendered structures of sectarianism but also the specific significance of heteronormativity and the heteronormative Lebanese family to sectarianism in Lebanon.

## **From state of emergency to state of opportunity: New possibilities (and problems) for feminist and LGBTQ activism**

Whereas the previous section talked about the tensions, problems, and silences that emerged with the invasion and the accompanying state of emergency, this section will discuss the "up" side of all this—how this state of emergency also set in motion new forms of organizing, outreach, collaboration, visibility, and legitimacy; how the state's abandonment of responsibilities allowed previously marginalized groups to move into state territory so to speak and gain new visibility and legitimacy; but also how activists'

work during the invasion highlighted the dangers of transnational institutional norms and NGOization.

The invasion of Lebanon not only ushered in a deeply problematic state of emergency, but also created new opportunities for organizing, outreach, and collaboration among activist groups. Although national and familial discourses of unity enacted various forms of silencing and exclusion, so too did they enable a newly shared sense of common aspirations. Several activists talked about the sense of unity that brought Lebanese and others in Lebanon together to support one another during this time. Gilbert described the shifts in mood from the first few days of the war to later, as things developed and the resistance movement amassed some victories. This along with the number of refugees, the human element, brought people together and contributed to the sense of a common cause, even across class lines:

Even some of the families in the neighborhood around Sanayeh Park<sup>14</sup> where the refugees slept that I know were part of March 14,<sup>15</sup> and they were quite against Hizbullah, but they started cooking the food and bringing the food, and they had this committee of the families—of course, a lot of them didn't actually cook ... they got their maids to do it ... But you can see part of the Beirut bourgeoisie carrying big pots of mjaddarah (rice and lentil dish), or bringing something, which this was really eye-opening.

There were many that came from other parts of Lebanon to volunteer their skills, their time, and/or their money. As Gilbert put it,

... there was a very big sense of unity, but of course there was a lot of polarization. But the majority of people opened up their houses, and you know, we would have had a catastrophe if this did not happen, because the state was actually interfering and blocking.

In fact, some interlocutors argue that because the 2006 invasion weakened the ability of the state and other more traditional social and political institutions to provide services, it also opened up opportunities for new social and political organizing. The events in 2006 necessitated that a new generation of activists take the lead. At one point, the office number of Helem was included as a phone number on a local TV station as a number to call for support/relief. Helem members and others were giving media interviews, working on the ground with people, and fundraising. This visibility was important toward establishing more legitimacy of LGBTQ activists, even if it did not lead to full acceptance and incorporation; however, it was an important step. As Gilbert put it,

I think the biggest impact that it had was on the families of the refugees themselves. Because even after the war, when Samidoun working until December in the South, even then, they kept telling me that people are asking about Helem. So, people knew. A lot of the refugees knew, and this actually was a very important part in normalizing the issue with a lot of people. I don't know how, if the impact is long-lasting. Of course, these things have to happen a lot to have an impact, but at least at the time, there was this idea that there were these strange looking men and women [hahaha] doing all this work.

Rula also felt that Helem's involvement with relief efforts provided it with more legitimacy, moving the perspective of the activists themselves and about the activists from single issue to multiple issues. She added,

Helem was an essential part of the Samidoun network. And a lot of people knew that there were a lot of very openly queer people working with them, and a queer organization working with them on relief and stuff like that, and I think that helped mainstream that, and helped give Helem a lot of legitimacy with other organizations working on LGBTQ things, making the link, taking on responsibilities as citizens, if you want, or people living in this country who are not just single-issued people. I think that was one of the biggest accomplishments, or realizations that Helem finally got to, was that we have to be working on broader and broader issues and that was one of the issues that they worked on.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, the entity that would react in such circumstances through its offices and clinics, remained inactive. Local organizers with Movement Social (an NGO) went to the Ministry to volunteer and found it closed:

So they found someone from the Ministry who actually wanted to do something, she opened up the office, and they took over the phones! So the volunteers, the youth organizations, took over state functions for about two weeks, and people were calling Helem's office thinking that we're part of the government, in charge of relief, because we were the only ones who were actually saying we're doing relief and people please come here, we have money, we have food, and we have—it was a strange time, unfortunately.

Such work also created momentum for activist organizations to revisit their own practices and priorities. The realities of humanitarian relief work during the invasion inspired some interlocutors' critique of middle-upper-class LGBTQ activism. Before 2006, some interlocutors had been working for LGBTQ justice based upon a one-dimensional liberal framework of "gay rights."

The only precursor to Helem was a group called Club Free which "was more about identity and quite upper middle class, focusing on very Western ideas," according to Gilbert who was not involved at the time. He added,

When Helem started working on real issues, most left. And of course, part of them left when Helem was opened to non-Lebanese. And then in 2006, during the war, most were actually gone. And one of the things we noticed is that the more we start working on issues, social issues, public health, etc., the poorer our members become ... And the richer members will just leave.

For Gilbert, "sexual liberation is part of the class struggle." Discrimination or oppression impacting people based on their sexual identity, practices, and orientation or their gender is often compounded by class. Gilbert explained,

The impact of Article 534.<sup>16</sup> If you're rich, if you're well connected, if you live in the city, it does not apply to you. Just like the laws against drugs don't apply to you. Just like any law does not apply to you. Even traffic laws don't apply to you. If you have a hummer, you can just do whatever you want. So, it's not an issue of all gays and lesbians, if we agree on this terminology, are being oppressed. There's a specific part of this community that's not oppressed, and is actually part of the oppression. We know that people in the State, in the government, who are putting obstacles to our work, are actually gay.

While there was international mobilization and support from gay individuals from all classes to an extent to the campaign to abolish the law, the reality remained that those in

positions of privilege and power were not as concerned. If anything, it seemed that publicity around the article could put a dent in the profitable sex tourism industry and the image of Lebanon as a liberal haven in the Middle East. However, the majority of people impacted by this article were actually poor gay and transgendered folks who had limited job opportunities.

Helem thus began restructuring its work to address the needs and challenges of gay and queer subjects of lower socioeconomic classes. Activists explained that once “you find yourself in war,” one must rethink this framework. They distanced themselves from “mainstream” LGBTQ activists who had the privilege of isolating themselves from the invasion, and continued to focus only on keeping gay nightclubs alive during the invasion. As one activist, Gilbert, told us, the existing NGOs or feminist or social service organizations

... did not allow people to support the resistance even though many people wanted to do so. So after the war, we noticed that a lot of the old organizations are no longer very active, because the people in the organizations realized that this is not the choice ... it opened up the space for groups like Helem and Meem or other new groups that started forming—a new generation of activists that during the war, were able to take the lead.

Thus, the process of doing relief work became entangled in the process through which new feminist and LGBTQ collectives either formed or were consolidated and new feminist and LGBTQ visions emerged.

At the same time, however, as organizations gained legitimacy and access to institutionalized resources, they also faced the risks associated with being drawn further and further into national and transnational systems that privileged certain forms of activism and activists over others. There was a constant need to challenge the role of the *UN* and other elite and external forces from “taking over.” Although activists focused diligently on the level of grassroots solidarity during the first few weeks of the invasion, it soon became clear that the “state doesn’t like it.” Gilbert explained,

... the UN came and monopolized everything. They took over everything, and they gave it to a team working in the UN that’s publicly linked with March 14, and then the complications started when this happened. So, it was a very positive experience the first two weeks, and then the second two weeks it really showed that this solidarity that existed, the State did not really like, and they did not want this at all.

Nesrine spoke of the perpetuation of global power imbalances and unequal distribution of resources through the particular definitions of civil society embedded in funding strategies and international development programs. She noted,

The problem is that it is hegemony, it’s the modern form of colonization, its anti-movement, it allows you to build great NGOs, it doesn’t allow you to build great movements, the system of you reporting to the government as an NGO, getting transparent and send minutes and getting approval from the government that you reworking against the government, that just doesn’t make sense.

After the war in 2006, funding streams empowered, through huge financial resources, certain types of organizations and gave them as such a lot of space to act and engage in society. This rebuilt patron–client relationships often along sectarian lines, while depoliticizing civil society.

Our interlocutors contended that global neoliberal economics constrained the work of dominant NGOs and led to the proliferation of feminist and LGBTQ organizations that isolated gender and/or sexuality from other structural problems (militarism/war, classism, racism, sectarianism, etc.), reinforced US imperial discourses about the invasion (such as Islamophobia), aligned themselves with the interests of middle upper class women and queers, and contributed to the marginalization of feminists and queers with left-leaning approaches or approaches that aimed to dismantle multiple intersecting social injustices simultaneously.

### **Moving forward: Reframing the war on terror and reimagining feminist and LGBTQ politics**

As discussed above, the 2006 invasion of Lebanon heralded many things: an intensification of the global war on terror; the enactment of a new post-racial logic of obliteration and responding logic of emergency; and the need for feminist and LGBTQ activists to further sharpen their critiques of familial and sectarian discourses, but also opportunities for those same activists to raise their profile, gain legitimacy (with all its pros and cons), and reform their own agendas. In short, the lessons to be drawn from the 2006 invasion are complex and suggest the need to rethink feminists and LGBTQ politics as we move forward.

Consider, for example, how our interlocutors' participation in relief efforts with families and communities on the ground, and the ways that several returned to the families they were born into for support and survival during the invasion challenge liberal feminist and queer politics that have called simply for de-prioritizing the political focus on heteronormative families and children. American queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004), for example, urges queers to abandon the idea of a future constituted by the form of a child and to abandon the "fighting for the children" while contending that "the dignity of queerness would be its refusal to believe in a redemptive future"—grounding queer ethics and politics outside kinship and reproductive circuits—spaces "that use the bribe of futurity to distract us from the ongoing work of social violence and death" (p. 18) Our interlocutors' stories challenge this stance, illustrating that feminist and queer activists living the realities of US and Israeli militarism do not share the privilege of abandoning the future or abandoning families and children. If we return to their stories in which the Israeli invasion was turning homes to rubble and killing children, where one's life world is one in which the possibility of death is ever present and children do not signify the future, but death itself, then the figure of the child takes on a different meaning. From the standpoint of our interlocutors, feminist and queer activism did not come with the privilege of leaving one's home, of engaging with the heteropatriarchal family or sectarian state, or of abandoning the child. What was happening on the ground to families in Lebanon—to children—demanded that our interlocutors' work against violence and



killing was a demand for life itself. It was a feminist and LGBTQ movement fighting for the option to live and the possibility of a future. Fighting with and for families and children was part of a struggle aimed at keeping people—all people—alive.

Thus, on the one hand, the invasion stands as a potent reminder of the material and symbolic realities of militarism and the urgent need to understand how a post-racial logic of obliteration and total violence plays out on the ground. At the same time, however, activists' insistence on intersectional critiques during the crisis revealed the deeply troubling silences and exclusions all too easily enacted during a state of emergency. An overly simplistic reduction of priorities to issues of "life and death" falsely compartmentalizes questions of gender, sexuality, race, and class as superfluous luxuries compared with the bare needs of food, shelter, and safety—when, in fact, the very organization, definition, and distribution of such essential needs is structured by those very relations. Thus, the new spaces that our interlocutors created and are creating are careful to pay attention to the multiplicity of oppressions, to be inclusive of the various actors, to speak up of the taboos, and to not replicate exclusionary practices performed by more mainstream feminist and LGBTQ organizations.

We can understand many aspects of these activists' work as constituting a feminist and LGBTQ critique of imperialism and the way imperialism, nationalism, and sectarianism take on local form in Lebanon. Their anti-imperialist work is intersectional and transnational, building solidarity and bridges across worlds and continents and insisting on the relevance of sexuality and patriarchy to this work. These activists were calling for the need for safe streets and a safe society, a society that fights or criminalizes sexual abuse, criminalizes domestic violence and sexual harassment, and disentangles marriage ideals and practices, while linking these to other issues such as socioeconomic class injustices, war, sexuality, religion, and regional matters, such as Palestine, the status of refugees in Lebanon, and racism against migrant workers whether from other Arab countries, East Asia, or Africa.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, throughout the period of the 2006 invasion and its aftermath, these activists were involved in what many other Lebanese were doing—saving lives, rebuilding homes, and participating in leftist anti-imperialist movements. Yet they were also redefining concepts of gender and family beyond ideals of biological kinship while bringing the problems of sexual violence and the safety of women and queers into the same frame as responses to war. They were articulating a feminist and LGBTQ anti-imperialism, a critique of how a logic of emergency that privileges immediate matters such as war or national liberation reifies a hierarchy between war on the one hand and sexism and homophobia on the other. They understood that the killings and sectarianism must stop immediately, but they also did not want a logic of emergency to define their politics.

Their critiques raise important questions about the meaning of human life—particularly when Lebanese—brought into the discourse of war on terrorism that assumes that anyone critical of the United States or Israel is a supporter of *Hizbullah* and therefore a terrorist. These activists were conceptualizing family, affiliation, and the concept of "life" in a more comprehensive way. They were centering bodily harm, death, and killing while refusing to give up other forms of human dignity and what it means to live a full life—forms that do not appear in a temporality of crisis—whether the safety of women and LGBTQ people or the dominance of the heteropatriarchal family. They were

imagining a politics in which countering military violence and heteropatriarchy are both part of a struggle aimed at keeping people alive. They put heteropatriarchy that exists in families and communities in the same frame as racism against migrant workers and the violence of war, bringing various regimes that people have had to live with to the center. These activists were enlarging the frame in which we understand the local and the global and the family and politics—and they were struggling to imagine radical responses that can expand the future that one imagines.

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### Notes

1. For additional information on the founding of Meem and the lives of queer women in Lebanon pre and post the founding of Meem, refer to their book *Bareek Mista3jil*.
2. For an excellent account of the founding of Helem and the various political transformations along the way, refer to Makarem (2011).
3. Helem Girls was a short-lived experiment inside Helem. Organizers of Helem Girls conducted a survey and organized few focus group meetings among the women associated with Helem and others on their needs and desires. A resounding need was for the creation of a lesbian space where women feel safe to come and discuss their own issues and working on building their community without necessarily being “out.” Helem Girls published a newsletter called *Suhaqiyat* and initiated their activities shortly before the June 2006 war. Organizers then went on to create Meem officially in 2007.
4. In the article, all names have been modified to protect the identity of our interlocutors.
5. Our method draws upon these works *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2012) and *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Visweswaran, 2000).
6. We use the term buffer to refer to a buffer zone similar to the “Security Zone” governed by the Southern Lebanese Army, a proxy army of Israel, which ruled over this so-called Security Zone for many decades.
7. Report from the Lebanese Government (2006), *Rebuilding Lebanon Together: 100 Days After*, [http://web.archive.org/web/20070712085041/http://www.rebuildlebanon.gov.lb/images\\_Gallery/Rebuilding%20Lebanon%20Together-4.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20070712085041/http://www.rebuildlebanon.gov.lb/images_Gallery/Rebuilding%20Lebanon%20Together-4.pdf)
8. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/09/05/why-they-died-0>
9. <http://www.landmineaction.org/resources/ForeseeableHarmfinal.pdf>

10. We define empire building in terms of neoliberal economic expansion and domination, support for the depoliticization of revolutionary social movements through NGOization and donor-driven agendas, support of puppet governments through the threat of military or economic domination (e.g. Jordan and Egypt), wars on countries that do not comply with imperial interests, the economic and military backing of Israeli-settler colonialism and expansion, and the circulation of media and government discourses on terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism.
11. Feminist scholars like Chandra Mohanty, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Robin Riley et al. (2008) and Mohanty (2006) contribute an invaluable assessment of how the new Orientalism operates in relationship to imperial feminisms. The justification for imperial expansion rests on the idea of the West saving Muslim women from gendered and sexualized oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Razack, 2008; Riley et al., 2008; Sudbury, 2000). Jasbir Puar (2007) and Sima Shakhshari (2012) contribute analyses of how the ideas of “failed heterosexuality” and “backward” homophobic otherness provide crucial justification for Western imperial violence and war (Puar, 2007).
12. US and Israeli rhetoric failed to mention the over 9000 Palestinians and untold number of Lebanese (including some for over 30 years without trials or due process) and other Arabs held illegally in Israeli prisons (including more than 300 children). They also omitted that Israel has been violating Lebanon’s sovereignty long before Hizbullah existed, long before the capture of two Israeli soldiers—and that Hizbullah was created in 1982 as a direct response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that year. In 1948, Israel seized seven villages of South Lebanon alongside the dispossession of Palestinian people, and regular incursions into Lebanon and violations of Lebanon’s water, land, and air space have been a common practice by the Israeli state for decades. In 1968, Israel bombed the Beirut international airport destroying 13 Middle East Airlines planes. Under the guise of expelling the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. The Israeli troops attacked West Beirut, killing 20,000 civilians, destroying homes and businesses, and displacing 400,000 people. In 1985, Israel withdrew from most of Lebanon, but continued to occupy Southern Lebanon until 2000, when Hizbullah forced Israel to withdraw from Lebanese land although Israel illegally continued to take water from the Litania River and maintain control over Shebaa Farms and Sharhuba Hills. Along with their “withdrawal” from Southern Lebanon, Israel left over 300,000 land mines which have, since then, maimed children and killed farmers, fisherman, and shepherds since Israel refused to provide Lebanon with a map of the land mines. In addition, since the “withdrawal,” Lebanese prisoners, captured 27 years ago, remained in Israeli jails. It is in this context that Hizbullah captured two Israeli soldiers. According to Lara Deeb (2006), “both sides, on occasion, have broken the ‘rules of the game’, though UN observer reports of the numbers of border violations find that Israel has violated the Blue Line between the countries ten times more frequently than Hizbullah has” (<http://ns2.merip.org/mero/mero073106>).
13. Zaim is the Arabic word for leader, a common term used to describe warlords, parliamentarians, and other leaders of political, sectarian, and sometimes familial institutions.
14. Sanayeh Park is one of the last public green parks in Beirut. During the many wars affecting mostly South Lebanon, displaced families would end up sleeping in the park. During 2006, Samidoun, a coalition of groups and individuals initiated by activists (including those of Helem), began working to support displaced families during the war. They took charge of Sanayeh providing services, food, distribution of resources, and fundraising for relief efforts (<http://samidoun.blogspot.com/>).
15. March 14th is a coalition of political parties named after the date (14 March 2005) of major mass protests against the Syrian presence in Lebanon that followed the assassination of Rafik Hariri, former Prime Minister of Lebanon, on 14 February 2005. This coalition

- includes the following right-leaning political parties: The Future Movement (Hariri), the Lebanese Forces, the Phalangist party, and the Progressive Socialist Party (Jumblat), among others. They were created in response to the commonly known March 8th alliance also named after major mass protests that took place on 8 March 2005. This alliance included the following political parties: Hizbullah, Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement (Aoun), El Marada Movement, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), among others.
16. Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code adopted from the French law during the French Mandate of Lebanon states that “Sexual intercourse contrary to nature” is punishable with up to 1 year of imprisonment. The Article is rather unsound legally due to the challenge of definitively defining what is contrary to nature from a legal standpoint. However, this Article has been used to criminalize same-sex intimacy between men in particular. Helem and other groups had launched a campaign to abolish the Article (<http://www.helem.net/node/22>).
  17. We consider our interlocutors’ critiques to make important contributions to feminist and LGBTQ scholarship and activism in and about the Arab region and Muslim majority countries more broadly. Their critiques contribute to emergent scholarship that challenges Orientalist and Islamophobic approaches to gender and sexuality in this region and dis-entangles concepts and practices of gender and sexuality from an apparently “cultural” or “religious” domain and instead, locates gender and sexuality within complex social structures and historical contexts (Al-Kassim 2013; Amar & El Shakry 2013; Amer 2012; Babayan & Najmbadi 2008; Georges 2013; Habib 2010; Habib 2007; Jacob 2013; Massad 2007; Mikdashi 2013; Najambadi 2005; Puar 2013; Shaksari 2013).

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