

## Editorial: What Revolt Means

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## Editorial: What Revolt Means

Myriam Sfeir

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When I think of revolutions, and specifically the Lebanese revolution of October 17, 2019, what immediately comes to mind is the poem by W. S. Merwin (1962, p. 207) entitled *Separation*: “Your absence has gone through me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color.” This is exactly how I felt every time I had to travel while Lebanon was going through the revolution. I always made sure to return from a business trip one day before Independence Day... but this year, Independence Day had a totally different meaning: it was one of the happiest days of my life. Marching in Martyrs’ Square, chanting slogans such as “*Haq, hurriyeh, dawle madaniyeh*” (right, freedom, a civil state) and “*Haq, hurriyeh, dawle elmeniyeh*” (right, freedom, a secular state), I felt euphoric. I could identify with the images of our feminist pioneers, who took to the streets to vocalize their demands in the national struggle for liberation and independence. I could see the close connections between women’s demands for emancipation and independence. I remembered Alaa Salah and Habouba Kandaka, who chanted: “They burned us in the name of religion, *thawra* (revolution) / They killed us in the name of religion, *thawra* / They jailed us in the name of religion, *thawra* / But religion is not to be blamed, *thawra*.” I remembered Lina Ben Mhenni chanting anticorruption slogans such as “We will not forgive!”, “Equality for women!”, and “Justice for the martyrs of the revolution!” I recalled peace activist Iman Khalifeh, who asked, “Do you think people need a permit to revolt?” when she called for a peaceful march to protest the atrocities of the Lebanese War. I thought of Wadad Halawani’s famous plea, which echoed across the militia radio stations, calling on all Lebanese who knew someone that was missing to march with her in front of the Abdel Nasser Mosque to demand government support for their missing relatives and friends. The images kept coming, and I felt exhilarated.

We are not faring well in the Arab region when it comes to gender justice; that is a fact. Perpetual insecurity, ongoing conflicts, economic challenges, and now a global pandemic have magnified preexisting vulnerabilities, with women suffering the most. Women all over the Arab world, from Syria to Iraq, from Libya to Sudan, from Yemen to Palestine, and from Lebanon to Egypt and Tunisia have raised their voices against injustice, demanded long-overdue reforms, and continued to return to the streets to protest, regardless of the situation. Women have been at the forefront of the protests in the Arab world, fighting for gender equality and mobilizing for change in a region that is so resistant to it. As Carmen Geha notes in this issue, feminist demands continue to take center stage, because the personal is political. While it might be true that for some people this slogan is now a cliché, it never fails to resonate with the reality on the ground.

In the Lebanese context, the ongoing revolution is overwhelmingly female and young. Women are indisputably the leading figures of the Lebanese revolution, a force to be reckoned with. They are the voices of change. Women who have participated in the protests have called for the replacement of the personal status law with a civil law that will govern us all, and which will include legislation that condemns both rape and early marriage, give women the right to initiate divorce, protect women against domestic and gender-based violence, and enforce a clear custody law that prioritizes children's well-being. These women are calling for imposed quotas in parliament and cabinet to ensure fair female representation and participation in political life. They are advocating for an amendment to the nationality law that will allow women to pass on their Lebanese nationality to their children and husbands, a right that will liberate many of those living in Lebanon who are currently considered stateless. These women want a government and society that will respect, protect, and fulfill its obligations with regard to women's sexual and reproductive health, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. They are calling for the abolishment of the *kafala* visa sponsorship system, which treats foreign domestic workers as prisoners in their employers' homes and subjects them to long hours of labor.

Throughout the revolution, Lebanese women have attempted to enforce nonviolence, maintaining the peaceful face of the protests. Even when violence has escalated, they have taken

charge, occupied the cities, led the protests, organized sit-ins, blocked roads, organized marches and public discussions, led recycling and cleaning initiatives, and even cooked alongside men to feed the thousands of protesters congregating every day. As they did during the Civil War, Lebanese women continue to serve as a buffer between protesters and the state: they are the intermediaries who shield the men, protecting them from police brutality. Women have directed their efforts toward maintaining constructive dialogue between the protesters and the government. I believe it is thanks to their presence that violence has been reduced. I also believe that the talks and public discussions that have taken place in Lebanon's various cities have served as an important piece of transitional justice: it is well known that Lebanon did not address the human rights violations that took place during previous sectarian conflicts, especially the Civil War, in a serious or transparent manner. Publicly discussing the war, its atrocities, and the importance of peaceful coexistence and acceptance of the "other" were very instrumental in advancing reconciliation when Lebanese mothers organized two marches and walked for peace, pledging never to allow conflicts to escalate. "Kay la nansa" (so as not to forget) is a slogan we can never do without, simply because Lebanon failed to deal with the past and no formal process of truth and reconciliation was undertaken. As with everything, civil society took the lead in launching initiatives to document and trigger the constructive dialogue that was essential for reconciliation.

Back in October 2019, civil society played an active role in the revolution that managed to topple the government. The new government has a significant number of women in positions of decision-making power—the largest ever number of women in government in Lebanon. Perhaps the gender card was played to appease the demands of the women's groups: it would be premature to judge the work of these women in government, and whether or not they will act in favor of women's interests in Lebanon more broadly. Women's presence does not necessarily mean women's power, nor does the presence of women ensure that women's rights will be the focus of these politicians. The number of women in political positions is just the first step. What we want is a feminist perspective in government that will translate into policies—meaning that we want to reform discriminatory policies that have been around for too long, and we want to implement policies that are in line with global standards for women's equality. In that respect, we

hope that not only the women but also the men in power will be advocates for gender equality, and will be in favor of full human rights and social justice.

In this issue, we celebrate the determination of activists to keep on fighting despite ever-increasing challenges. We celebrate their courage, rage, hope, and persistence. Bridging academia and activism by bringing together academics, activists, and artists to write about revolt and revolutions is our way of creating a space for dialogue and shared agendas. While the current sociopolitical situation continues to fluctuate daily, we hope that this issue is able to provide a glimpse of the many resistances that continue to occur across the region, and the powerful women, feminists, and social justice activists who continue to take the helm of these movements.

## References

Merwin, W. S. (1962). Separation. *Poetry*, 99(4), p. 207.