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## Revolution Is Female

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### Introduction

Revolution has different meanings for different people. This is something I realized in discussions with my friends since the eruption of protests across Lebanon from October 2019 onward. Some of my friends think the mobilizations are just a cry against the system; others think it is an actual revolution; still others think it is just people demanding their rights and showing their frustration with corruption. Different people have used different means to express their feelings, such as chanting through megaphones, dancing, singing, sleeping on the streets, and occupying spaces in upper-class parts of Beirut such as Zaitunay Bay, Downtown, and Eden Resort, which has been a method of protest against the wealthy and corrupt politicians who live there and are among the few Lebanese who can afford to enjoy these spaces.

For me, this revolution raises questions regarding the popular slogan “Revolution is female.” Does the slogan mean that the revolution is a Lebanese mother with no right to pass her nationality on to her children? Is she a migrant working mother under the local sponsorship system known as *kafala*?<sup>1</sup> Is she a farmer who has no medical insurance, social security, or pension under Lebanese labor law? Is the revolution a woman beaten up by the men in her family, or is she a divorcee thrown into the streets and deprived of her children by her ex-husband with the blessing of religious clerics? If the revolution were female, then this is how she would exist in Lebanon

Indeed, angry, oppressed, and rebellious women are the main topic of the Lebanese revolution, leading the movement in the streets, leading the chanting, and providing media coverage of the movement. So many images and videos have circulated in the media, showing dozens of women lined up, standing arm-in-arm in front of the thousands-strong crowd to form a human shield between protesters and police. Is there any greater strength than this? Women have given the revolution a more peaceful nature and played a crucial role in preventing street fights among the protesters, stood on the frontlines, and formed shields to protect the demonstrators, thereby maintaining the peaceful state of the protests and helping to extinguish any potential sparks of violence. Some consider this an improvement in relation to gender, specifically women's roles, considering that political events have historically been male-dominated.

Women have proven that they are in the lead, and that they are not afraid to face danger and crises. Women of all ages, sects, and doctrines went out into the streets, chanting powerful slogans and cheering. It was beautiful to see women leading the cheers, in addition to standing and forming human chains on the front lines to defend others. For literally placing their bodies between other protesters and state forces, several women have become icons of this revolution, such as Malak Alaywe-Herz, who was filmed kicking a man's firearm out of his hand and confiscating it from him. She became an icon of the revolution overnight. The video was circulated across Lebanese social media platforms until it went viral. Lebanese artists have made illustrations of her as a tribute to her bravery.

In other words, this is a significant step toward the political empowerment of women, the enhancement of their political participation, and the elimination of gender inequality.<sup>2</sup> This improvement has manifested itself in all aspects of the Lebanese revolution and its public spaces. Thus, the revolution's slogan has practically become "The revolution is female," and this has even extended to demands for a change to the Lebanese national anthem by adding the word "women" to one of the lines, a request made long ago by feminists such as Iqbal Doughan but put on hold

until now. Women form half of Lebanese society (or even more), and this change would be a clear and powerful statement that Lebanese women are equal to Lebanese men in terms of citizenship. The national anthem is one of the most significant national symbols for any country, as it plays a crucial role in bolstering people's morale and uniting them under shared collective visions. The national anthem represents a country's vision and direction, as its language is usually direct, clear, and nonmetaphorical, which is why some countries change their national anthems in accord with changing visions and objectives. Therefore, adding the word "women" to the Lebanese national anthem would be an important step toward eliminating inequality and empowering women in Lebanon.

Worldwide, throughout the history of revolutions, there has been a type of art called "protest art" or "activism art." This kind of art has often been one of the most important means of activism, especially in the modern era, as it employs visuals to deliver important messages (Groys, 2014). Street art, especially politicized street art, has many forms, such as murals and graffiti, and has an important, special, and prevalent presence across the world (Ryan, 2016). Artists have long employed such artistic forms to express their political thoughts, or their reactions to important political events. An example is the mural series painted by the Yemeni artist Haifa Subay at the 2019 Singapore Biennale. She depicted a few themes in her series of nine murals, including destruction, and the suffering of children during conflict and war. One of the most interesting of these murals was her depiction of women and peace in the mural entitled *Women make peace*. She painted half a woman raising her arm with a bent elbow and a closed fist in a show-of-power sign; the other half shows a peace symbol and the universal symbol for women merged together. This mural represented the power of women and their ability to make peace (Subay, 2019). Another was *The Sheba doves*, in which the artist painted doves flying over the ancient temple of the Queen of Sheba. This mural depicted the destruction of historic sites in Yemen because of the war. The doves symbolized peace in the country, while the temple was a symbol of Yemen's ancient sites (Subay, 2019).

Subay started soon after the Arab Spring and used her sketchbook to express her thoughts through painting. She then went public and started utilizing the empty walls in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, to paint and express herself (Singapore Biennale, 2019; Subay, 2020). In 2017, she created 12 murals depicting women and children affected by the conflict in Yemen as part of her first graffiti campaign, called Silent victims. In 2018 she launched her second campaign, the main theme of which was peace (Subay, 2020). In her murals, Subay tries to give a voice to children and women who are vulnerable and at risk because of threats to their lives, going beyond the situation in the country. She presents images of reality and expresses a different point of view, beyond words and verbal expressions (Subay, 2020).

In addition, activism through art is a visual reflection of people's inner feelings and emotions. Activism art can illustrate these emotions, and provides artists with an empowering opportunity to express these thoughts at times when dialogue is often not possible. Not only does it express artists' and other people's internal emotions and feelings, but activism art can also convey or transmit those feelings to others, including the public, and can create connections between the public and the artist or the subject of the artist's work. Activism art produced during and after the Arab Spring is an excellent example of the power of this artistic format. The Arab Spring produced an enormous quantity of street art and murals in the Arab region. Egypt has contributed with its share of street art and artists who actively participated during the time of the revolution.

For instance, in 2011, Bahia Shehab painted a series of calligraffiti in the streets of Cairo named *No, and a thousand times no* as part of her contribution to the revolution (Naguib, 2016). In her project, she used the word "no" to reject many things, such as "no to military rule," "no to a new pharaoh," and "no to emergency law." One of these "no" phrases—"no to stripping people," with a blue bra drawn beneath it—was dedicated to the veiled "blue bra girl" who was beaten and

stripped by the police on December 18, 2011 (Soueif, 2011, cited in Naguib, 2016). Such street art productions have depicted resistance, triumph, bravery, and suffering.

Similarly, Lebanon's streets have been covered with revolutionary art. Lebanese artists have taken to the streets, and have utilized their artistic skills and abilities to express themselves and the people through their art. Roula Abdo is one of the many artists who have joined the protests, and she has decided to use her art to contribute to this collective movement of the people. Her work, specifically the piece entitled *Revolution is female*, is a powerful example of the effect that such revolutionary art can have.

Abdo is a Beirut-born visual artist. She received her master's degree in fine arts from the Lebanese University Institute of Fine Arts. She has always been intrigued by the human figure and condition, and this fascination is translated into her work as she merges realistic everyday human states with abstract elements, including collage and mixed media. Through her paintings and murals, she is always on a quest for communication, striving to catch the flow of thoughts and the conceptual and expressive acts of words and images.<sup>3</sup>

According to Abdo, she is part of a group of artists who have been painting on the streets and roads of Beirut since the start of the revolution. On what they call "revolution walls," these artists express themselves and deliver messages by using their various tools (brushes, spray paint, and others) and formats to demonstrate another side of the revolution, one that is full of new ideas, thoughts, and creativity. "Protest art" creates a kind of "collective consciousness,"<sup>4</sup> using very peaceful and artistic methods that attract people. As an artist, Abdo believes that visuals can be used in revolutions as effective instruments because of the imprint they leave in the viewers' minds. During our interview, she stated: "We live in a 'visual era,' and when people see a 'visual,' it affects them faster and they can relate to it easily; not everyone focuses on speeches, but they focus on visuals more easily and quickly." She added: "Visuals are effective instruments during

revolutions, because they leave an impact and imprint on viewers' minds; visuals are a weapon of communication, they affect people quickly, and are often easy to relate to." In many cases, visuals can produce dialogue where before, in response to writing and speaking, there was little conversation.

As we discussed the revolution in Lebanon, Abdo asserted that activism art had played an important role in that revolution, specifically at the *Nour el-thawra* (light of the revolution) march led by the Women of Thawra. It was during this march that Abdo produced what would become one of the most iconic images of the Lebanese revolution, a painting entitled *Revolution is female* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Revolution is female*. Painting by Roula Abdo, November 6, 2019.

The idea of producing activism art during the feminist march began with an association called Arts of Change, which had been promoting art on streets and walls for a long time, even before the revolution. Their first project had included two huge murals on Hamra Street in Beirut. One of these murals is of a woman standing and carrying three children on her head; a bird stands on top of the head of one of the children. The other mural is of a woman carrying a giant plate full of food on her head. Arts of Change coordinates artists' works during protest events, and provides them with the necessary materials to use artwork as a medium to influence people to call for change (R. Abdo, personal communication, November 29, 2019). During the preparations for the *Nour el-thawra* march, Mariana Wehbe, the march organizer, contacted Abdo directly and invited her to participate; Wehbe and Abdo then contacted Arts of Change and asked them to invite other female artists to participate.

On the day of the march, November 6, 2019, Abdo painted *Revolution is female* at the center of Martyrs' Square. The idea for the painting, according to her, had come into her mind before she started to paint (R. Abdo, personal communication, November 29, 2019). She used her artistic skills to convey an important message, as she wanted the face of the woman in the painting to look like a statue in order to symbolize women in the revolution and make them iconic. The painting came out as a mix of beauty, strength, and solidarity, a great depiction of revolutionary women and the roles they have played (R. Abdo, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

Abdo stated that she deliberately chose the color red for the background of the painting, even though she often uses black and white in her paintings. She said that red is the color of revolution, of Lebanon, and of women's passion. She added that red highlights importance, can be easily detected by the eye, is strong, and has a great impact, which again was meant to reflect the impact of women in this revolution. Overall, red is a color that symbolizes love, revolution, passion, and strength. In addition, Abdo highlighted that painting a woman's face is an even more effective way of communicating artistically, because faces can be seen all the time and everywhere: they attract attention, and they are relatable. "Faces represent you! They are like a mirror, which delivers the message to you faster as you relate to them," she concluded (R. Abdo, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

On the reactions to her painting, Abdo said that the painting received widespread public support, both during the march and afterwards. She added that people came up to her during the march and praised the way the painting symbolized the beauty and power of women in the face of the revolution. The woman looks firm, strong, and confident: she is in control, despite the growing instability and chaos that accompanies revolutions. Abdo notes that many women confessed to her that they were able to see themselves in the painting and related to the woman's posture. Today, people continue to share Abdo's painting as a reminder of the iconic role women



play in the Lebanese revolution and beyond (R. Abdo, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The kafala system is a visa sponsorship system for migrant workers in Lebanon that ties their residency and legal status in the country to their employers. It is an exceptionally exploitative system that leaves thousands of migrant workers, especially migrant domestic workers, with limited legal protections in Lebanon. It excludes them from labor law, which puts them at risk of abuse by their sponsors. Amnesty International called on Lebanon to end the system in 2019. For more information, see Amnesty International (2019) and Al-Jazeera (2019).

<sup>2</sup>The World Economic Forum reported at the end of 2019 that Lebanon's Gender Gap Index ranking had moved from 140th (out of 147 countries) to 145th (out of 153 countries).

<sup>3</sup>I was lucky to be able to interview her through a Skype call on November 29, 2019.

<sup>4</sup>"Collective consciousness" is a fundamental sociological concept that refers to the set of shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and knowledge that are common to a social group or society. Therefore, visual art is an effective tool to send any message and spread awareness. See Cole (2019).

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