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To cite this article: Mendelek, M. (2022). The struggle for women's rights after the Beirut blast: A resurgence of anti-feminist backlash? *Al-Raida*, 46(2), 25–29. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2342

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v46i2.2342>

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Article type: Article

Published online: 4th August 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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The Struggle for Women's Rights After the Beirut Blast: A Resurgence of Anti-Feminist Backlash?

Miguel Mendelek

Today, the basic human rights of every citizen in Lebanon are in jeopardy. For almost two years now, Lebanon has been trapped in a web of crises that began to proliferate shortly after the outbreak of protests on October 17, 2019. By then, an economic crisis was slowly beginning to unfold, one that would skyrocket a few months after the October 2019 *Thawra*. By early 2020, the surging number of COVID-19 cases brought the country to a total lockdown, leaving breadwinners at home with little or no income. Finally, on August 4, 2020, one of the world's largest non-nuclear blasts shook the city of Beirut, after which Lebanon sunk into a still-deepening financial crisis and political stalemate. Together, these compounded crises, left unaddressed by the Lebanese government, have created a struggle in Lebanon for basic, everyday needs to survive.

In the wake of these crises has been a rise in backlash against women's rights. Anti-feminist backlash, as defined by Ann Braithwaite (2004), is a "reaction to—and rejection of—the many changes in women's lives brought about by feminist social movement" (p.18). In Lebanon, backlash is not an incident so much as a constant that defines the comportment of the government vis-a-vis women's rights (Moughalian & Ammar, 2019). Over the years, the voices of feminists catalyzed and brought about change, especially in legal matters, thus challenging the system.¹ However, after the Beirut Blast, women's rights have settled at the very bottom of the political agenda. In this piece, I reflect on some preliminary observations and opinions about the possible congruence between the 2020 Beirut Blast and the onset of an anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon. I argue that backlash, as an already existing trend, was further galvanized by Lebanon's detrimental political and financial situation after the Beirut Blast.

After August 4, 2020, the fears about Lebanon's volatile political, security, and financial situation overwhelmed most Lebanese. Since then, the culmination of endemic crises has made

everyone, including feminist activists and women's rights organizations, rethink their priorities. Why?

First, Lebanese, I argue, are frustrated by the inconclusive results of the revolutionary fever of the *Thawra*. Further, with the onset of these various crises, Lebanese are now greatly distracted from the battle of rights. Just a few months after the *Thawra*, protestors' high hopes for change and their chants of secular demands fell prey to an explosion that sunk Lebanon into a state of paralysis. As Carmen Geha (2021) puts it, protestors, in the aftermath of the Blast, "retreated to a victim position" (p.12). Then, the financial crisis overturned the concerns of the average citizen. With the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira, followed by intolerable inflation, the cost of living has become the number one priority of ordinary Lebanese. While everyone rallied in 2019 against the corrupt political system, with women at the center of civic engagement (Dore-Weeks et al., 2019), those who now take the streets make demands for their basic needs to survive. In this free fall, Lebanese have been taken hostage by a failing state.

Second, the mainstream political parties, who had been mocked and condemned during the 2019 protests, are now paradoxically (re)strengthening their grip over the state through the same power-sharing formula. Shortly after the protests, politicians boldly coopted protestors' discourse to survive the opposition. However, this narrative has been detached from political bosses' (*zaim*) continued use of the same old approach. More than a year after the blast, the same old guards are in power again.² Today, Najib Mikati's government, much like all governments in post-war Lebanon, partitions the shares of power among the same post-war parties through "new faces" and "appealing" puppet ministers. Nothing more than possibly slowing down Lebanon's plunge into total chaos is expected from this government. The point is, with the same parties in power, little will change.

These factors, indeed, precipitate anti-feminist backlash. Feminist concerns were eclipsed by the blast, leaving room for the same old powers to continue unabated. Today, the conditions required for significant change are absent. Backlash, as mentioned earlier, is the system's constant in Lebanon. Although breached in 2019, this constant is now further galvanized as the sum of these crises has overwhelmed popular interests and the political agenda likewise. Indeed,

the “survival mode” of most, if not all Lebanese puts the battle for women’s rights at stake. Yet, amid these discouraging events, significant feminist developments have occurred.

Following the Blast, several feminists and women’s rights organizations, brought together by UN Women in Lebanon, signed the “Feminist Charter of Demands,” a gender-sensitive response to women’s urgent needs in the recovery process.³ Through this charter, activists sought to create a list of unified demands that all signatories would work collaboratively to achieve. An important milestone in the history of feminist mobilization in Lebanon, the charter has now developed into a joint platform for Lebanon’s feminist civil society (UN Women, 2020). Through this platform, feminist organizations seek to converge efforts and pressure the state more effectively.

More recently, several civil society organizations, spearheaded by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Fifty-Fifty, drafted a law for a women’s quota for the upcoming 2022 parliamentary elections. *Grosso modo*, the law allocates 26 seats in Parliament for women (Shibani, 2021). This proposal, however, is not new. It rather comes as part of a historical chain of attempts to improve women’s political representation in Lebanon, of which a quota remains, according to Dagher (2021), “the most direct measure that would produce immediate change” (p.17). Although the proposal was lobbied by Member of Parliament Inaya Ezzedine, the joint parliamentary committee refused to discuss its terms and dropped the draft law (El-Hage, 2021). Primarily to preserve the same old shares of power, and with Lebanon’s preoccupation with the hassles of the financial meltdown, the bill was “peacefully” abandoned.

With limited popular support for women’s rights claims in the current moment, the patriarchal system is now playing its trump card for backlash. Because the many crises greatly preoccupy ordinary citizens, the system is successfully bypassing rights claims in its political agenda. Together, the rhetoric of “survival mode,” to which some women’s rights organizations themselves have adhered, in addition to the political parties’ tight grip on decision-making, have galvanized a form of anti-feminist backlash. In the face of a destroyed socio-economic and political landscape, the shift in priorities from “claims-making” to “survival” has brought the vigorous battle for women’s rights to a halt. Amid Lebanon’s existential crisis, the attention of many civil society groups has drifted away from the battle for legal rights to humanitarian aid

and support to Lebanese in need. However, in a battle of rights, this “truce” favors the opposing actor, especially if the opposition is not willing to compromise.

The concurrent economic, health, and political crises plaguing Lebanon have stranded everyone in a landscape hostile to change. In addition, the Beirut blast has left Lebanon in a state of depression, exhaustion, and complete frustration. Although the blast is described by many as a dividing line between two époques (The Associated Press, 2020), the near future only promises a prolonged stalemate. In this turbulent landscape, the gender and justice gaps stretch more over the days. As ABAAD’s newest feminist campaign criticizes, the notion that “It’s not the time for women’s rights,” is unacceptable in the face of rising gender discrimination and violence against women (ABAAD, 2021). Indeed, the onslaught of backlash, further galvanized by the “survival mode” of many, has silenced many feminist voices.

Notes

¹ See UN Women. (2020, March 6). *History of the struggle for women’s rights and gender equality in Lebanon*. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2020/03/lebanon-timeline>.

² Nearly two weeks after the outbreak of protests on October 17, 2019, Saad Hariri’s government succumbed to protestors’ calls and resigned. Few months later, in January 2020, Hassan Diab succeeded in forming a new government, only to resign few days after the blast. More than a year later, in September 2021, Najib Mikati succeeded in forming a new government after the failure of his predecessors, Mustapha Adib and Saad Hariri.

³ See UN Women. (2020, August 27). *Lebanon’s feminist civil society platform calls for ensuring a fair and equitable space for women in the political sphere*. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/08/cso%20lebanon%20charter/updates/charter%20of%20demands%20english%20149.pdf?la=en&vs=4201>

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