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The Rebuilding of Beirut: Building the Arab World's First Feminist City

Lina Abirafeh & Rachel Dore-Weeks

Following the Beirut blast, we wrote that the rebuilding of Beirut offered the opportunity to create the Arab region's first feminist city¹, one that challenges notions of how space is used and rises from the ashes a better version of itself; a city built by everyone, for everyone. What has happened since?

In September 2020, as Beirut lay in ashes, we called for its rebuilding into the Arab world's first feminist city. In making this call we went beyond the rhetoric and got concrete: We demanded unequivocal investment in social spending, more women in leadership and decision-making, and non-negotiable demonstrations of commitment to women.

Despite the simplicity of these asks, we knew then that this was utopian—an idealistic call setting the bar high for the reconstruction of Beirut, against which we could collectively monitor and measure the actions of Lebanon's leaders as they set about to rebuild and reform a broken country.

While we knew that Beirut would not become the Arab world's first feminist city, we could not imagine how far from this call we would be two years later.

On August 4, 2020, an explosion in the port of Beirut ripped through the city, killing hundreds, injuring thousands, displacing hundreds of thousands, and destroying entire neighborhoods. For many in the West, their image of Beirut has been one in the throes of civil war, the "Paris of the Middle East" razed to the ground, bullet-holed buildings and streets filled with debris. Much like the news clips of the 1980s. And following the blast, Beirut looked just like that. Again.

That event, much like September 11, 2001, has become a marker of time, a dividing line, distinctly separating life before the Beirut explosion and life after. Our mourning and calls for justice for what was lost on that day continue unabated; for the people dead and still missing, for those injured, and for the neighborhoods that have now changed beyond recognition (HRW, 2021). Our everyday discussions with friends, relatives, and colleagues continue to come back to that event, and that day—where were you, were you affected, how and how are you now?

As we ask these questions, we are also, two years later, still asking ourselves whether Beirut can rise again from the rubble. In asking this we must not romanticize the Beirut we lost. Lebanon, before August 4, 2020, was a country where inequalities were rife and evident, and always insufficiently addressed. It was a country already debilitated by layers of disaster—economic collapse, government corruption, environmental crisis, sectarian divisions, poverty, and the added complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic (ESCWA, 2020).

Further compounding this were deeply entrenched and enduring gender inequalities that continue to deepen along with the country's crisis. Exemplifying this is the composition of the new government; of 24 ministers, only 1 is a woman, representing a significant rollback in the number of women appointed (UN Women, 2021). A recent flurry of action around calls for more representative politics and the application of an electoral gender quota was met in Parliament with disdain; that women's representation is not an urgent issue, and must wait (Middle East Eye, 2021).

But we are done with waiting.

We know that the depth and pervasiveness of gender inequalities and biases in Lebanon have shaped the country and the crisis that persists today; they fuel the celebration of militarism and violence and put women and girls at higher risk of discrimination, poverty, and violence - particularly in emergencies.

Lebanon ranks 132 out of 156 countries in the 2020 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2019). It ranks 132 out of 170 in the Women, Peace, and Security Index (GIWPS, 2021). This means that Lebanon is vastly unequal in terms of women's presence in political and economic life, among other indicators - a gap that will take at least 150

years to close (Ghanem, 2020). Beirut exemplified these inequalities; it was a city characterized by deep economic divisions, with minimal public spaces and large swathes of urban slums.

All this before the latest series of tragedies—the COVID-19 pandemic, the Blast, and then a political and economic crisis that places Lebanon as one of the most desperate countries in the world. And in the face of inaction, the situation continues to spiral out of control (Reuters, 2021). According to the World Bank, it is experiencing one of the worst financial crises of the last century (World Bank, 2021), with inflation rates to rival Zimbabwe and Venezuela (Goyeneche & Khraiche, 2021).

So not only has Beirut *not* become the Arab world's first feminist city, but it is now even worse than anyone could have ever imagined. Close to 75% of the Lebanese population is in poverty. Food prices have increased by 557% (El Dahan & Kanaan, 2021). The national debt is exorbitant (Arabian Business, 2021). The currency has lost 90% of its value (Vohra, 2021). The banking system has collapsed (Hubbard, 2021). Fuel shortages are creating tensions, resulting in violence and deaths (Hubbard, 2021). Hospitals are paralyzed. Medicines are running out (Iskandarani, 2021). And any Lebanese able to leave the country is doing so—with a one-way ticket (Vohra, 2021b).

This is making life worse for everyone in the country, though particularly for women—who are seen, and treated, as secondary to men (World Bank & UN Women, 2021). This is not only true for Lebanese women, but also queer women, migrant and refugee women, women living with disabilities, and many others already living on the periphery and hidden beneath layered inequalities. Those who were reducing what they ate before, are going hungry. Those who could hardly pay for their homes before, are now losing them. Women who were employed before are still not working, unless in the informal or black market, with risks, and without protection. Trafficking and forced sex work have increased, along with violence against women. We saw all of this coming. We called for action (Abirafeh & Dore-Weeks, 2020). We worked to prevent, to protect, to mitigate risk. But did we do enough? No. Certainly not.

And so, we write this—again—from the perspective of two feminist aid workers with 39 years combined experience in 27 countries worldwide. We once again share our recipe, in hopes that this time, we will actually use it.

As we look forward, we remind ourselves that Beirut has been destroyed and rebuilt throughout the ages. A year ago, we had hoped it could be rebuilt better. We saw an opportunity to build a foundation that is solid and sustainable. This is about more than the safety and public spaces; it is also about equality, dignity, access to opportunities. It means, building a city with—and *for*—women.

First, we must reiterate our call that business as usual is not acceptable. Business as usual, or a strive for stability over change, will only reinforce Lebanon's weak foundations. Now more than ever we are faced with the stark reality of what the current governance system has generated. We must change the way we work. While gender equality and women's rights are not the only elements of this, they are fundamental to the structural change needed to build a meaningful future.

Our recipe begins with women at all levels of leadership and decision-making, not as an afterthought, but as a deliberate intention. This recognizes the value women bring not only for themselves, but also for families, communities, and those we too often leave behind. Everywhere from the grassroots to the government, we need women. Representation matters now more than ever. If it takes positive discrimination in the form of quotas to get women in, then let's do. Their voices will make all of us stronger.

Women in power and politics will initiate long-overdue reforms (Clayton, 2021). Lebanon has been weighed down by discriminatory laws in the form of personal status codes, rendering women's bodies and lives to the authority of religious leaders, all men. There is no room for regressive legislation in the new Lebanon. Research has shown that a country's chances of peace, prosperity, and progress are not based on the government or the economy—it is based on how a country treats its women (Crespo-Sancho, 2018).

Increased social investment in health and education are equally necessary for a robust Lebanon. As are targeted efforts to support women to enter the economy. When societies are educated and healthy, and women are employed, families, communities, and countries are better, healthier, and stronger. We know this from decades of experience. Now is the time to do it.

Lebanon is filled with private, prohibited spaces – from the government to gardens. A feminist city is built on accessibility, open spaces, public resources, and shared recognition of the value of the city as a home for all. This entails public transportation, public spaces, and the ability to be safe anywhere, anytime—regardless of color, class, nationality, and sexual orientation. Here also, representation matters. We must recognize and celebrate women’s contributions to Lebanon throughout history by honoring them with statues and memorials that represent their work and show our respect for diverse role models. This will have an incredible influence on the young population, demonstrating that this is a Lebanon by and for them, one they are happy to grow old in, rather than pressed to escape from.

Central to our recipe is the acknowledgment that as the state is rebuilt, there must be long-term and continued investment in supporting a strong and politically independent civil society. This includes strengthening women’s organizations to deliver vital services to areas and people that the state cannot reach, but also to serve as watchdogs and pressure levelers—working to enhance state accountability and rebuild a social contract between residents—the rights-bearers—and the state—the duty-holder.

Here is what is *not* included in our recipe: The dismissals and patriarchal rebuttals that this is “not the time” for women’s rights, not the time for a feminist agenda, not the time for representation and equity and inclusion. We reject this. We accept no excuses.

Every time is the time. Now is the time. Today is the time.

This is because the so-called “women’s agenda” is so much more than just an agenda by women, for women. It is a critical prerequisite for democracy, reform, and recovery. When we are told women’s rights must wait, we are being told that the comprehensive reform needed to rebuild Lebanon too must wait. And it is too late for that.

So, we say it again—loudly. We must collectively work to build the Arab world’s first feminist city. Women are the face—and the force—of Lebanon’s recovery and resilience. Male leadership in Lebanon has failed its population. It is finally time for Lebanon to allow women to fully rise from the ashes.

Notes

¹ This article was originally published in *The Independent* on September 4, 2020. The article can be found here: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/beirut-explosion-lebanon-blast-news-womenfeminisma9703546.html>

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