

Faith Alexandra Perkins

**What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement:
Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel**

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Today Middle Eastern feminist movements are either seen as developing due to the role of the West and its NGOs or seen as non-existent. Women are seen as oppressed and in need of the help of the West. Nevertheless, in many of these countries, there have been feminist movements since the turn of the 20th century. The feminist movements here haven't had as long to develop and solidify as long as the Western ones, and therefore in this globalised world, are berated with many influences from the Western feminist movements instead of influences and inspirations from their own cultures.

Both the Lebanese and Israeli feminist movements began during the time of colonialism. While Lebanon was controlled by France, Israel had the British. Without the western influences, the respective feminist movements would not have been cultivated. These two movements, originally distinctive, eventually found common ground due to the influences of the western world. Starting from different cultures, religions, and ethnicities, the Lebanese and Israeli movements grew into similar movements, only being separated by their respective personal status laws.

In this paper, I will present a discussion of the formation, the goals, the control, and the influences of these movements to form the larger discussion of what is a Middle Eastern feminist movement, and the ways in which Israel fits into the Middle East.

Formation:

Lebanon: The feminist movement in Lebanon developed under French colonialism alongside the movement in Syria. The women's union between Syria and Lebanon was formed in 1924 and would continue until 1951 (Keddie, 95). This organization was multi-sectarian and Arab nationalist (Keddie, 95). This movement tried to include all religions because they realised that in order to reach all parts of society, they would have to include everyone. In 1928, a

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

book published called *Unveiling and Veiling* by Egyptian feminist Nazira Zain al-Din was published (Keddie, 95). This sparked debate across many of the Arab countries over whether or not the veil was oppressive to women or not. Al- Din argues that the Hijab violates Islam because it takes away the equal rights of women given under Islamic law (Keddie, 95). The Lebanese and Syrian union discussed this book ardently, but more so in Lebanon where there is today still a tension between the non-covering Christians and the covering Muslim women. This book sparked an early rift in the early feminist movement. In 1944, the Lebanese Arab Women's Union was created (Keddie, 96). This was created in response to the growing number of nationalists in Lebanon and what was perceived to be independence for the country soon (Keddie, 96). Members of this group attended the Arab Women's Conference that was held in Cairo to which the Israeli feminists weren't invited (Keddie, 96). It is interesting that the Syrian and Lebanese women's union, which claimed to be multi-sectarian, would not advocate for letting Israeli or even Palestinian feminists to join in the conference. They didn't though because they probably perceived the Israeli feminists to be Jewish nationalist or Zionists which stands to in contrast to Arab nationalism. In Lebanon, there was large participation by women in the nationalist movement. They participated in strikes and attended rallies, yet in the 1930s, there was this idea was formed of "patriotic motherhood" which forced all of women's goals and complaints as second to national independence (Keddie, 98). The nationalism here sought to see women at home, taking care of the children, instead of participating actively in the movement like in Israel. After the state became officially became independent in 1946, women continued to advocate for the vote for a few years afterwards (Keddie, 97). Women continued in Lebanon till women were able to receive the vote on February 18, 1953, yet afterwards feminism again became marginalised (Arenfeldt, 230).

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

In the 1960s and early 1970s, many organizations were created in order to push women's issues to the forefront of society. For example, the Women's Democratic Gathering and the League of Lebanese Women's Rights were established in the 1960s (Mohanty, 150). When the civil war broke out in 1975 between the Christians and the Palestinian refugees, women's rights were pushed aside in favour of seeking solutions to the fifteen year long war (Mohanty, 154). During which, the organizations advocated for peace and doled out charity to the victims (Mohanty, 154).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement began to move more into the international sphere. This was coupled with the UN's Decade of Women beginning in 1975 which wanted to hear more from Third World feminists (Mohanty, 176). In 1985, Lebanese feminists, Laura and Joseph Moghaizel, established the Lebanese Association for Human Rights (Arenfeldt, 50). With women in the spotlight more so after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Lebanese feminists sought funding from NGOs in order to help with social welfare and other women's organizations (Mohanty, 189). A problem that came from this though is that the feminists' agenda was now controlled by the West and its agenda. During the 1990s, the Lebanese government partnered with these women's organizations to help with social welfare and to understand the future of gender relations there (Mohanty, 193). In 1995, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) was created (Mohanty, 193). With the rise of international recognition of feminism, the influence of the West on Lebanese feminism was cemented. Before this, the Lebanese feminists had less of connection to the West as Israel, but their connection to the West was strong enough that many of their goals echoed Western feminist goals.

The fourth wave began in 2005 (Mohanty, 210). One major organization created then is Nasawiya which uses social media to fight the problems associated with sexism, classism,

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

heterosexism, racism, and capitalism (Mohanty, 212). These are some of the same problems to which Western feminists advocate a solution.

Israel: In pre-state Israel, the women realised their inequality in society and began to form groups to advocate for change. According to Deborah Bernstein, in her book: *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel*, in pre-state Palestine, the feminist movement became the biggest welfare organization in the Yishuv (206). Without a recognised state government, these new Jewish immigrants sought to help as a government would and to advocate for the greater expansion of the Zionist dream. In 1920, the Association of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Israel was established. The members were of middle class, secular background (Bernstein, 197). They are reflective of the Zionist movement as a whole which was largely made up of secular, middle-class Jews. One of their concerns was voting rights for women within the Yishuv, but in 1948, they got the vote in the new state (Bernstein, 197). The Women's Worker's Movement was developed in 1920 due to the small number of women in the work force (Bernstein, 183). In contrast to Lebanon, Zionism sought to include everyone in the national movement, and due to Zionism's ideals, women were feeling that Zionism had failed them because Zionism is perceived as allowing everyone to be equal. In the pre-state years, the women Zionists were having trouble advocating for an ideology that hadn't solved all of their problems. In both the Lebanese and Israeli pre-state movements, women were subordinated in the name of nationalism. After the creation of the state, the nationalists left the women behind, and it took a war for the Jewish women to establish their movement again.

Israeli feminism was reawakened after the Yom Kippur War in 1973. According to Kalpana Misra in her book, *Jewish Feminism in Israel*, she writes that after the war, women across the country realised the ways in which Zionism and Israeli nationalism were gendered. For example, she writes, that without the men, the country's progress was halted (Misra, 5).

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Accompanied with Zionism is the idea of the Sabra who is a strong, macho man, unafraid of anything, but there is no room in this idea for women. Feminists had already been meeting in small groups throughout the 1970s, but after the war, more women began to join the movement. The women realised that Zionism had failed them. It had not created this perfect state where everyone was equal. They had been discouraged from participating in the work force, and therefore, when the men went away for the war, so too did the labour. In response to growing recognition of Zionism and the state's failure to help women, the Women's Party was created in 1977. It was used to put feminism on the political map and raised consciousness about the idea (Misra, 7). This party was used to inform men of women's inequality and to show women there was a movement. Up until this time, feminism had been organized to fit an upper class, Ashkenazi narrative. Votes in the national and community elections for this party came from all over the country which show that women did see feminism as a solution to their problems.

In the 1990s, feminism and women's rights incorporated itself into the government. In 1992, the Committee on the Status of Women was created in the Knesset (Halperin-Kaddari, 50). This committee aimed to advance women's equality in many areas such as education, personal status laws, and public discrimination (Halperin-Kaddari, 50). They also hoped to end discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual orientation. They wanted to reduce the wage gap and eliminate violence against women (Halperin-Kaddari, 50). Many of these things are the same things that American and Western feminists were arguing about at the same time. It's also very similar to the things that Lebanese feminists began to fight for. This is because of the influence of the West on these feminists' movements. More specifically, it is the influence of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and its goals. The 1990s really saw the integration of all of Western ideals into the feminist movements in these two countries, making the two movements become even more similar.

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Goals:

Lebanon: In 1924, the Women's Union of Syria and Lebanon advocated for the strengthening of Arabic in schools over French (Shehadeh, 40). Their goals were more social and charitable goals for the greater good of the public over that of women. For example, they sought to get rid of homelessness and begging (Shehadeh, 40). They wanted to protect the morals of women throughout the two countries, yet in this union, the agenda was set by the Muslim women, and therefore, the morals of Muslim women would be different for the Christian feminists, making it difficult to enforce everywhere (Shehadeh, 40). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, these two nations didn't have a recognised government to dole out welfare. Like in pre-state Israel, the women saw that they must provide charity because the state did not have a welfare state yet (Shehadeh, 40). They also advocated for shorter working hours for women and conditions and wages similar to men (Shehadeh, 40). Before and after the independence of Lebanon, feminists there were advocating for the right to vote. In 1944, along with other Arab feminists at the Cairo Conference, they drafted a proclamation which advocated for partial suffrage for educated women (Keddie, 96). Thus, their early claims that the movement would include everyone, no matter the background, were thrown out. Both the Israeli and Lebanese feminists had movements which told the upper-class narrative, yet they had to have prodding to even discuss other narratives. Along the same lines, they wanted the right to hold office which was a goal of the early Israeli feminists as well. It is interesting that these two movements sought to have women be treated as men. This is definitely a Western, feminist ideal because the idea is that if women are treated the same way men are treated, then they will have less problems. Both movements took up the nationalist narrative in order to force French or Britain out of their countries. In order for the Lebanese feminists to force the French to leave, they began to strike in 1946 (Keddie, 96). Although women's labour force participation had been low, they saw their participation as large enough to have an

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

impact on the French and by extension, Lebanese economies. Under the French, women were encouraged to enter the work force, more so than they had under the Ottoman Empire (Keddie, 96). The communists and labour unions also supported the women's participation in the work force but didn't advocate for a change in the status of women (Keddie, 98). Other goals were raising the marriage age to sixteen. Previously the marriage age had been fourteen, and many of these women saw this a too young age for girls to get married at (Keddie, 96). In 1944, due to the large Communist presence in Lebanon, they advocated for universal health care for every citizen (Keddie, 96). They began to demand for compulsory education for girls in 1922 (Shehadeh, 39). A final goal of these early feminists was the recognition and end of spousal abuse (Keddie, 96).

In second wave, in the 1960s and 1970s, the feminists began to push for acknowledgment of women's issues in the public sphere (Mohanty, 150). They also began to protest for peace starting in the 1975 when the civil war began (Mohanty, 154). The third wave began in the 1990s and advocated for more social welfare from the government (Mohanty, 193). Also they began to further connect their movement with the West through the application for NGOs' funding (Mohanty, 196). In 2005, the fourth wave began, and they began to protest problems that are typically voiced by Western feminists such as the wage gap, sexism, inequality in education, and for the elimination of domestic violence (Mohanty, 210). Even though the feminists began to advocate for things that are typically seen as Western problems for women, these problems affect women across the world. It is interesting to note that they would attack these problems before they spoke about patriarchal structures of the government and greater society or the underlying tensions between religious groups which hinders the movement. The influence of the West here is what caused some issues to be fast-tracked, while other issues that women in the United States have largely gotten rid of such as religious personal status laws, still plague this country.

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Israel: In the first wave of feminism that began in the pre-state, the women largely formed organizations to protest the inequality in the labour market (Bernstein, 206). They also formed institutions that worked as social welfare programs for the informal government (Bernstein, 206). After the Yom Kippur War, the feminists began to advocate for more control of reproductive rights (Misra, 3). This was around the same time that the Roe vs. Wade case was being debated in the United States. Just as reproductive rights were being debated in America, so too was domestic violence. Since Israeli feminists looked to the American feminists for guidance, it is not surprising that soon after domestic violence was brought into the open in America, then they too began to debate it. They began to stage large protests and marches against domestic violence (Misra, 6). One of the goals of the Women's Party was to give help and shelter to those affected by domestic violence. (Misra, 6). In 1985, the movement staged a large march against violence against women in order to bring the problem to the forefront of society (Misra, 10).

During the Lebanon war, Mothers against Silence was created in order to protest the war in Lebanon. Also they protested the fact that many of their sons were dying there (Moghadam, 316). Again, this is similar to the situation during the Vietnam War. Inside of this movement and in response to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, the Women in Black were created in 1988 in order to seek peace between Arabs and Jews (Misra, 114). It is interesting that these women felt that the state could not find a solution so they had to step in. It echoes the pre-state charity institutions and Women's Worker's Union. After the Oslo Accords of 1993, the group stopped (Misra, 114). This seems strange because those accords quickly fell apart, and it would seem that afterwards the two communities would need peace between them more so than ever. Due to the lack of unity behind a cause, this led to this large inequality between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The same can be said about Lebanon where the elites don't reach out to the poor and the religious groups still define one's grouping in the

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

society. In the 1980s, Arab-Israeli feminists focused on issues relating to the liberation of the occupied territories than the issue of peace (Suad, 344). Later the Arab feminist narrative switched to gender issues in the 1990s (Suad, 344). Since the Arab-Israelis were never included into mainstream Israeli feminism, their goals and issues are different from the Jewish feminists. As much as Israel would like to get away from the notion of tribalism, it can be seen here with the Arab-Israeli feminists and even the Mizrahim who were excluded and do the excluding when they could have all united behind a shared movement like ending domestic violence.

In modern times, they movement moved to advocate for more Western goals which is similar to the modern Lebanese movement. They sought to eliminate the wage gap, the inequality in education and the labour market, and discrimination based on sexual orientation (Halperin-Kaddari, 50). Again, since the goals of this feminist movement has such similar goals to Western feminist movements, it is interesting to note that they chose to go after these goals instead of attacking the personal status laws, which make sure there isn't a separation between church and state. These laws make women have unequal footing in parts of their lives. By planting so many Western goals, they forget to see things in their cultures there are things aren't "Western" but oppressive and patriarchal.

Control of the Agenda

Lebanon: Like in Israel, the early movement was among elite, educated women. Many of the popular class showed no sign of wanting to join (Keddie, 254). Under the union between Syria and Lebanon, prestige in the group was given to the Muslim members but after the separation of the states under the French and the subsequent World Wars, the Christian members of society rose in prominence and influence (Keddie, 96). The Christian Women's Solidarity Association was created in 1947 (Arenfeldt, 230). The right wing Christian Phalangists had risen in power during World War II because of their relationship with the

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

French (Keddie, 96). This was composed of the elite and bourgeoisie Christian women and included women from twenty Christian charity organizations across the country (Arenfeldt, 230). One of the main problems with the Christians being in charge of the feminist movement is that they began to criticize Muslim women for veiling. They saw the veil as something oppressive and sought to eliminate the use of it. Like in the case of Ashkenazi feminists who didn't understand the problems of Mizrahi women, the Christians here wanted to dictate an agenda that was harmful and ignorant of other cultures and lives. Lebanon has always been very liberal in veiling, but in recent decades Muslim women have returned back to the veil and modesty perhaps in reaction to the perceived Western and foreign voice of the feminist movement and larger society.

Israel: Since the beginning of the feminist movement in Palestine and later Israel, the control was given to Ashkenazi women. Like many things in Israeli society, the power was given to the Ashkenazim who were deemed modern while the Mizrahim, backwards. This is similar to Lebanese society where, after World War II, the Christians were deemed modern and the Muslims, backwards. In 1984, the Mizrahi feminist narrative was raised at the Fourth Feminist Conference (Misra, 99). This narrative of the Mizrahi women was raised by Ashkenazi women who couldn't understand the problems of the Mizrahim. There were few Mizrahim at the conference who were able to speak up for their cause. (Misra, 99). In 1994, Mizrahi feminists disrupted the Israeli National Feminist Conference in order to raise the issue Ashkenazi hegemony which they perceived in the larger feminist movement (Misra, 13). Their problem can be perceived as a larger societal problem that is happening in Israel even today. The Ashkenazim argued that the ethnic divide between the Mizrahim and the Ashkenazim was not relevant to the larger Israeli feminism, and that the social gap between the two groups no longer existed (Misra, 101). The Ashkenazi women failed to see that they were only held back by gender while the Mizrahi women were held back by gender and race

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

(Misra, 105). This is similar to the situation in America with the question of white feminism versus intersectional feminism. In response to the perceived racism of the larger feminist movement, the Mizrahi feminists hosted their own feminist conference in 1995 (Misra, 102). The issues raised here were the question of the ethnic divide between the Jews in Israel, and the issue of their long history of Mizrahim oppression in Israel (Misra, 102). In response to racism and exclusivity, the Mizrahim created their own movement in order to address their problems which they perceived weren't being addressed by the larger feminist movement. The Mizrahi women still cooperated and work with the larger Ashkenazi, feminist movement to protest things that affected all of them like the wage gap or domestic violence (Misra, 15). This is similar to the ways in which women of colour created their own movements in America, and the way in which the Christians in Lebanon created their separate movement as well.

Influences:

Lebanon: Under French colonialism, Lebanon was exposed to many more Western ideas and influences than they had been under the Ottoman Empire. A French Catholic University and the American Junior College for Women were created in the 1920s in order to educate the elite women of Lebanon, mainly the Christian women (Keddie, 265). Thus, the women were exposed more to Western ideas than had their parents and grandparents. Under the French, women were encouraged to enter the workforce and receive an elementary education (Keddie, 265). In Lebanon, women have always been prominent in intellectual and social life, yet Christian women more so than Muslim and the elites of the society more so than the poorer (Keddie, 265). This means it is not surprising that feminism, which is generally thought of as a Western concept, was more available to the elites of both Israeli and Lebanese society. Marie-Claude Thomas in her book, *Women in Lebanon: Living with Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism*, writes, "The exposure to western ideas and the dismantling of

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

social institutions gave new opportunities for women that benefited the middle and upper class” (120). Thus in relation to colonialism, these women were exposed to Western ideals which in turn allowed them to acknowledge and address some of the more patriarchal parts of the larger society and culture. One similarity between the two countries is the role personal status laws play in Israel and Lebanon. Personal status laws have always been determined by the respective religious group to which one belongs, and it stems from the millet system. For example, there are sixteen recognised religions in Lebanon which compete for control over their respective constituents. Divorce, marriage, child custody, and inheritance are controlled by the respective religious groups (Salhi, 147). One of the ways in which the larger feminist movement is blocked from reaching out to every aspect of a woman’s life here is the personal status laws. The feminism is hindered by the differences in the personal status laws. One time that these groups came together was when they wanted women to be able to inherit in the case that there was no male heir. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, they campaigned for the right to inheritance, and it was granted to Christian women and some Muslim women (Arenfeldt, 230).

Another large influence to the feminist movement is the role of NGOs. Many Western NGOs support this movement, but again they set their own agenda on what should be prompted or not (Arenfeldt, 236). According to Pernille Arenfeldt in his book, *Mapping Arab Women’s Movements: A Century of Transformations Within,* “Due to the influence of these groups, in recent years, it has hindered the creation of a shared vision of the future of women’s rights there (240). So for example, a Christian NGO will influence the Christians feminists to perhaps advocate against veiling, but then that makes tension with the Muslim and Druze feminists against the Christians. In this way, the role of NGOs here is comparable to the role and influence of America on the Israeli feminist movement.

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Israel: With Israel's strong relationship with the West and more so America, it has always had Western influence on its feminist movement. Due to this connection, their feminism was based around the American feminist movements. When American feminists began to become militant in the 1960s and 1970s, then so too did the Israelis (Misra, 4). When Roe vs. Wade was being discussed, they too began to discuss reproductive rights (Misra, 4). Also when American feminists began to voice their concerns about the problem of domestic violence, they too began to protest in the streets and offer care for victims (Misra, 4). They began to noisily protest at rabbinical courts, political gatherings, beauty pageants, and Knesset sessions (Misra, 4). It is not surprising that they looked to the American movement because in most other aspects of life, they looked to the West as a model. During the 1970s and 1980s, their feminist movement was financed by the American feminist movement, and therefore, the Israeli model became tied to the American one even more (Misra, 10). Although the Jewish feminist movement in Israel was never financed by NGOs, they had direct contact with the West who set the standards and agenda for these women.

Both the Lebanese and Israeli feminist movements were born out of interaction with the West and its colonialism. Both groups' agendas were ignorant of other women in society, and thus ignored the women who they deemed to be backward, different, and not Western. Throughout their history, the women have served in places where the governments were absent or neglectful. The goals of these two movements have been similar because of the increasing interaction with social media and the West.

The role of the West in feminist movements across the Middle East and North Africa has caused feminism to be perceived as Western and at times, foreign. Like colonialism, the role of the West in these feminism have stifled any notion of a feminist movement that isn't Western and doesn't follow the Western model. Lebanon and Israel need to be more introspective about their own movements and the problems that the women face in these

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

countries. By doing this, they can better serve the needs of their members and the women population in general. They need to accept and understand the differences between each other in order to fight the patriarchy but at the same time, support women whose lives are different than theirs'. By looking into their culture, their laws, and their traditions they can find patriarchal oppression that is not seen in the West. Women in these countries remain divided ethnically, religiously, and culturally but one of their goals must be to come together to fight the patriarchy and uplift other women.

What is a Middle Eastern Feminist Movement: Feminist Movements in Lebanon and Israel

Works Cited

- Arenfeldt, Pernille. *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations Within*. Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2012.
- Bernstein, Deborah S. *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish women in pre-state Israel*. New York: State University of New York, 1992.
- Halperin- Kaddari, Ruth. *Women in Israel: A State of Their Own*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Keddie, Nikki R. *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present 95-98*, 254,265 New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Misra, Kalpana and Rich, Melanie S. *Jewish Feminism in Israel*. New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press: 2003.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. *From Patriarchy to Empowerment*. New York: Syracuse University, 2007.
- Mohanty, Chandra, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Thomas, Marie-Claude. *Women in Lebanon: Living With Christianity, Islam, and Multiculturalism*. New Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Salhi, Zahia Smail. *Gender and Diversity in Middle East and North Africa*. United States: Routledge, 2010.
- Shehadeh, Lamia Rustum. *Women and War in Lebanon*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 1999.
- Suad, Joseph. *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*. New York: Syracuse University, 2000.