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UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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Deconstructing Anti-Feminist Backlash: The Lebanese Context*

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Abstract The matrix of deep-rooted social, political, sectarian, and patriarchal structures in Lebanon necessitates the introduction of a nuanced understanding of 'backlash' that veers away from definitions of the notion that apply mostly in Western contexts. This article proposes a contextualised definition of backlash for Lebanon and frames it by unpacking the structural flaws found in the very way Lebanese society is constructed, and in power relations within the country's familial structures. It also discusses the different forms of anti-feminist backlash observed in the country over the past few years, focusing on three axes: systemic violence, tactical backlash, and atomised backlash. Explored through case studies ranging from the hostile sectarian system against women in politics to radical religious groups, this article explores how backlash in this context diverges from the conceptualisations of backlash in existing literature.

Keywords backlash, Lebanon, queer, women, sextarianism, civil marriage, political participation.

1 Introduction

Born and raised in a socially and religiously traditional, politically affiliated family, Amani El Beaini first started exhibiting signs of rebellion as early as primary school. In her school, where gender stereotypes prevailed, girls were not allowed to practise sports; Amani insisted on playing basketball, so she joined a community team outside of school to do this. Twenty years later, Amani was at the forefront of the battle to stop the notorious Bisri Dam Project and a vital member of the national campaign to protect the Bisri Valley.³

The turning point in Amani's story, however, was the brutal assault she suffered at the hands of a member of her extended family. She insisted on reporting the man to the police and later taking him to court for the assault. Yet, to her dismay, her family pressured her to drop the formal complaint. She refused

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to concede. In a classic paternalistic scenario, Amani found herself denied justice simply for demanding it from a male family member. Her family expected her to heed to the community's needs and drop the charges. Community pressure did not stop there: it also affected police conduct. They significantly slowed down the complaint process. At the time of writing (2023) – over three years after the incident – no verdict has been reached due to the lengthy judicial processes in Lebanon.

Amani's story is not uncommon. Women in Lebanon live under a matrix of deep-rooted social, political, and patriarchal structures, originating from families and spreading to governmental institutions. This necessitates the introduction of a nuanced understanding of 'backlash' that veers away from its definition as a hostile reaction to perceived gains.

This article frames backlash in the Lebanese context and unpacks the structural flaws in the very way its society is constructed, as well as the different forms of anti-feminist backlash observed in Lebanon over the past few years. These forms can be categorised as tactical and atomised, and diverging from the conceptualisations of backlash in existing literature.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 explores the Lebanese context and unpacks notions that are specific to it. Section 3 departs from existing literature on backlash to delineate the features that characterise violence and anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon. Section 4 offers a discussion of the different types of systemic violence and backlash observed in Lebanon. Section 5 concludes.

2 The Lebanese context

Lebanon is a constitutional republic with an elected representative parliament and a constitutionally independent judiciary. The constitution mandates the partition of power in public offices, parliament, and government on a confessional basis among the country's four major male-headed sects; and also mandates these sectarian communities to handle their respective communities' personal status issues and establish their own religious courts.⁴ This creates a multilayered political system, a sectarian consociationalism that reproduces traditional patriarchy.

Over the past four decades, Lebanon has been ruled by an unaccountable political oligarchy with undisputed powers. Warlords-turned-governors morphed citizen-state relationships into patron-client dynamics with basic rights dispensed in exchange for political loyalty (El Rahi 2023a). The country's vulnerabilities culminated in the Port of Beirut's tragic explosion on 4 August 2020, against the backdrop of ongoing economic collapse ranked by the World Bank as among the top three most severe worldwide since the 1850s (World Bank Group 2021).

Maya Mikdashi's 'sextarianism' framework (2015) is particularly helpful in understanding the complex patriarchal political system women in Lebanon live under. It explains how sect and sex co-organise social and political life in Lebanon, and how they are mutually constitutive modes of political difference. Perhaps the personal status laws and census registration are two sites where sextarianism is most visible. Mikdashi (2014, 2015, 2022), among others (Joseph 2005; Traboulsi 2012), contends that the country's 15 personal status laws create non-homogeneous legal conditions for the Lebanese but share one commonality: patriarchal bias. They not only enshrine men's privilege over women, but also differentiate among women of different sects, stripping them of their ability to make unified claims.⁵ Mikdashi (2015) also demonstrates how census registration highlights the ways sex and sect coordinate to cement women's status within the Lebanese political order. Female citizens are registered strictly in relation to male citizens, as wives or daughters, while male citizens form the nodal points around which legal, bureaucratic, and kinship relations develop, extend, and contract (*ibid.*). Women cannot be considered heads of families or be non-patriarchally incorporated individuals.

Suad Joseph (1997, 2005) argues that the patriarchal family serves as a venue of social and political control in Lebanon. Under a frail state, she argues, kin became the 'anchor of security for Lebanese citizens' and a bridge to access resources in the market, the workplace, and in politics (Joseph 1997: 79). Resultantly, kin groups became recognised as legitimate political actors, claiming loyalty from their members that pre-empts and precedes loyalty to the state. The 'kin contract' arrangement remains one of the most significant deterrents to Lebanese women's full citizenship. Joseph (1993, 2011) also theorised other notions underlying the Lebanese patriarchal power matrix, namely patriarchal connectivity and political familism. However, the kin contract is the most pivotal for understanding the family-based patriarchy that permeates the state in Lebanon.

3 Relevant literature

Despite the wide scope, most definitions of backlash still fall short of capturing its nuances in Lebanon. A localised definition of backlash in the Lebanese context makes two fundamental diversions from existing understandings and reveals four distinct features.

The first diversion is in describing backlash as a reaction. Rowley's (2020) call for a reconfiguration of our understanding of backlash is relevant here. For instance, what has been framed as 'unprecedented' in the United States emerges from a long history of state-sponsored violence, institutionalised discrimination, and objectified disregard for non-white, queer, and immigrant-marginalised bodies (*ibid.*). In this sense, backlash is no longer a reactionary pushback or an anomaly, but should rather be

conceptualised as a condition that is inherent within systems of oppression, and a built-in self-protective mechanism (*ibid.*).

Similarly, linking Lebanon's political instability to its status as a 'weak state', Maya Mikdashi (2022) talks about an 'epidermal state' that has always been obvious, violent, and sovereign to vulnerable groups – queer, migrant workers, refugees, the incarcerated, and sex workers, among others. Mikdashi conceptualises the state in Lebanon as one that performs its sovereignty by regulating bodies through securitisation, violence, bureaucracy, and the law, using bodies' gendered, racial, sexual, and classed stakes as sites for this performance, and exerting violence against people positioned differently at various levels of precarity (*ibid.*).

The definition that frames backlash as a hostile reaction does not hold in the Lebanese context. The Lebanese epidermal state had been violating vulnerable bodies for decades before its violence came into full view with the nationwide brutal oppression of protestors in 2019. The reframing that Rowley (2020) proposes – that makes visible the quotidian violence of the state and its embodied and spatial effects, constitutive of backlash but not always necessarily obvious – is particularly relevant to conceptualising backlash in Lebanon.

The second diversion is around the assumption that progress is a precursor to backlash. Townsend-Bell's (2020) framing of backlash as a moment of revelation places it on a continuum with misogyny. The spectrum starts with the misogyny–racism node, organised around maintaining the status quo, and ends with backlash: various acts of overt and explicit violence responding to vulnerable communities' attempts to claim power, hence stepping over an explicit do-not-cross boundary. Townsend-Bell (2020) also suggests a middle pre-emptive backlash node, which works to prevent changes to the status quo and does not require an attempt to claim power. A group's mere existence in particular spaces is the infraction triggering violence, making backlash possible even in the absence of progress. Resultantly, for some groups, the distance between the everyday lived experience of misogyny – rigged with violations – and backlash as overt spectacle, is negligible (*ibid.*).

4 Backlash in Lebanon

4.1 Systemic violence as baseline

One distinct feature of backlash in Lebanon nuances the remedial backlash framing, accentuating a pronounced intentionality about preventing gains, built into the system's design, and meant to keep power concerted in a minority positioned at a specific intersection of sex, gender, legal status, and class. Women in Lebanon, as well as members of all vulnerable and marginalised communities, are 'surrounded by, embedded in, and pushing against a sextarian, epidermal state' (Mikdashi 2022: 182). This makes the hostility and exclusion that they face quotidian,

inherent within the system engulfing them, and intentional. The overt, more visible acts of violence – backlash – serve as tools to cement that system.

A second feature is the frail baseline position of women and other vulnerable communities within the system. With basic rights denied to them, the room for gains is already marginal, the space between the two ends of the spectrum is already insignificant, and claiming power is an elusive endeavour. In Townsend-Bell's (2020) terms, their mere existence is the infraction that elicits the hostility.

A third feature is the site from which this quotidian violence originates. What makes the predicament of women particularly devastating is that the exclusion they face results from power structures embedded in and flowing from family systems into the state (Joseph 1997). This feature reveals the fundamental role of the family, a non-state actor with considerable political clout, in the make-up and maintenance of the system. Amani's story that opened this article illustrates this. Even in a situation where she was physically harmed, her loyalty to her family was expected to take precedence over any claims to justice. The silencing in the domestic sphere serves to prevent the possibilities of gains.

The final feature of backlash in Lebanon is its function as a tool of misplaced action – an exit strategy for a system in a moment of overlapping crises. Perhaps this contextual definition aims to flip the script on backlash, from framing it as the violence marginalised communities endure when they cross a line, to what dominant powers would do when the system that upholds their privilege goes through a moment of peril. It shifts the attention to the network of powers that perpetrate this violence, as opposed to what those enduring it might have done to trigger it. The definition attempts to frame the political juncture – the system in crisis – as the trigger of the backlash unleashed by its dominant players. The more intense the pressure on the system and the more existential the crisis, the harsher the vitriol it unleashes against the most marginalised and/or any movement threatening the social and political order. Backlash serves as a tool to divert attention from looming socioeconomic menaces, to help the system avoid existential discussions, and to extend its longevity by creating imaginary enemies.

An equivalent to backlash in the Lebanese context could be,

the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion that are fed, incubated, and fuelled by the sectarian epidermal system; and that fight and obstruct advocacy for rights, but more importantly, impede the possibility of progress and gains. This structural hostility departs from familial structures, travels across generations, and cuts through governmental, non-governmental institutions, and the market.⁶

The various forms of violence and backlash in Lebanon are not on a spectrum *per se* but could instead be described as a pool of variegated tools – coexisting and operating concurrently and complementarily – making up a patchwork of hostile strategies that authorities use on demand depending on the requirements of the political moment. Apart from the systemic violence as default mode, forms of backlash include tactical and atomised backlash.

4.2 Tactical backlash

In June 2022, a video showing a floral installation on a billboard celebrating Beirut Pride being vandalised went viral on social media. In the video, a group of men under the name of Jnoud El-Rabb (Soldiers of God) (Christou 2023), who proclaim themselves as the ultimate defenders of God, and of the Christian community against alleged satanic endeavours such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex (LGBTQI) acts and civil marriage, are seen ripping off the installation whilst reciting verses from the Old Testament. Officially formed in late 2019, articles about the group speak of a membership of several hundred who claim to be ready to act if any phenomenon opposes their Christian convictions (Hayek 2022).

Jnoud El-Rabb's video emboldened official measures. Following its release, Lebanon's Ministry of Interior and Municipalities ordered security forces to take necessary measures to prevent any kind of celebration, meeting, or gathering of the LGBTQI community, calling these activities 'contrary to divine principles' (*L'Orient Today* 2022). Weeks later, a protest against pro-LGBTQI events was organised in Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city with a Sunni majority, followed by the creation of the 'Soldiers of Fayhaa', a similar group to Jnoud El-Rabb, in the city in July 2023 (Fayhaa is a title usually used for Tripoli). Most recently, in the summer of 2023, the country's political and religious leaders intensified their campaign against the queer community: the head of a prominent political party called for the killing of LGBTQI people (Younes 2023), the culture minister called for the ban of the *Barbie* movie (Jadah 2023), and the education minister called for the ban of a boardgame in schools because it showed a rainbow (Al Bawaba 2023). Following this slew of troubling remarks and decisions, Jnoud El-Rabb attacked a queer-friendly bar in Beirut, marking an alarming escalation in anti-queer sentiment (Daraj Media 2023). The group's attacks are part of a wider trend in Lebanon and the region of escalating rhetoric and violence against queer communities.

Remarkably, Lebanon has yet to repeal Article 534 of the country's Penal Code, which criminalises 'unnatural sex'.⁷ A legacy of the French colonial era, Article 534 is Lebanon's most publicly debated regulation on sexuality. It reflects the moral value system prevailing in the society, which remains largely traditional, based on dogmatic religious views and traditional gender roles and relations. Following the attacks in 2023, two parliamentary blocks proposed bills explicitly penalising homosexuality.

In this context, where sexuality is heavily policed, and some orientations and identities are criminalised, LGBTQI communities remain vulnerable. In some regions, so much as waving a rainbow flag might be perceived as 'a win' deserving of backlash, silencing, and even violence. This, however, has not prevented activists from founding non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and collectives to support the LGBTQI community and provide services for the most marginalised within it. In that regard, Lebanon is known to be the only Arab country where queer groups organise publicly.

The persecution has also not hindered several prominent voices – journalists, lawyers, and social media influencers – from voicing their support of the LGBTQI community and endorsing personal freedoms and rights more broadly. The last decade has seen increased activism for sexual freedoms, queer-friendly bars and spaces have opened, and celebrities have openly discussed their sexuality. However, the deployment of sexuality policing to manufacture moral panics over the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family has been a constant feature of governance in Lebanon. Anti-LGBTQI campaigns ebb and flow based on the optics and requirements of a junctural political moment, instigated by political and religious authorities.

The experience of the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which rose to prominence amid Greece's economic crisis a decade ago and won 18 parliamentary seats in 2012, might help explain the situation further. Groups such as Golden Dawn and to a lesser extent, Jnoud El-Rabb, small, often geographically contained networks of right-wing extremists whose ideology amalgamates politics and religion and whose politics are premised on dogmatic interpretations of religion, usually thrive in situations of disenfranchisement, poverty, and lawlessness (Trilling 2020). Just as Greece offered ideal conditions for the rise of Golden Dawn in the wake of the global financial crisis between 2010 and 2013 (*ibid.*), so is the oligarchic Lebanese state today paving the way for extremism with its deliberate inaction *vis-à-vis* the financial and economic collapse, and the ensuing impoverishment of large sectors of Lebanese society. Indeed, journalists and activists in Lebanon often and repeatedly accuse authorities of using various groups and entities to divert the attention of the masses from their ongoing hardships while dodging accountability (Mawad 2023; Moukaled 2023).

Civil marriage seems to also be 'a satanic project' in Jnoud El-Rabb's books, a heresy that paves the way for the legalisation of same-sex unions (Hayek 2022). The Lebanese context is one where citizens' personal status management and regulation is the exclusive mandate of religious authorities. The issue of civil marriage, in particular, has received considerable resistance for decades, with religious institutions framing it as immoral, sinful, and subversive. Yet several NGOs, legislators, politicians, and other figures have attempted to pass laws and proposals

for civil marriage. Bills proposing to legalise civil marriage in Lebanon have been debated in parliament since the 1950s but have always been systematically rejected (Khoury 2020). Like LGBTQI-centred panics, however, civil marriage debates re-emerge periodically, and tensions often seem to surge on the eve of junctural political events in the country, such as elections. The fearmongering appears to be stoked by political and religious authorities seeking to attack secular candidates who support civil marriage and aiming to maintain the political status quo.

Hundreds of couples continue to travel abroad for the explicit purpose of getting married civilly today because civil marriages are not contracted on Lebanese soil. Lebanese citizens who contract a civil marriage abroad register their marriage upon their return to Lebanon and settle issues and disputes arising from it in Lebanese civil courts that recognise such marriages. However, because the Lebanese state has not devised a unified civil law in Lebanon, these disputes are governed by the laws of the countries where the marriages were contracted (El Rahi 2023b).

The advent of a group of newly elected secular Members of Parliament (MPs) – dubbed the 'Change MPs' – to parliament following the 2022 elections, who overtly support civil marriage, prompted fierce opposition from both Muslim and Christian religious leaders. It galvanised discussions on televised talk shows and social media, triggering a renewed round of backlash by clerics and religious and conservative authorities. Several clerics took to social media to spew false information about civil marriage, demonise MPs Ibrahim Mneimneh and Halimé El-Kaakour,⁸ and incite hate and violence against them (El Rahi and Mendelek 2022).

Civil marriage and LGBTQI rights in Lebanon are fundamental sites of contestation: prone to debate and backlash, albeit backlash that could be framed as tactical. This is firstly because these are issues that sporadically, but systematically and deliberately, re-emerge on the eve of junctural political events and are made to seem like pressing menaces to the entire social fabric. They are thus exploited to construct moral panics over perceived threats to the hetero-patriarchal, conservative family order while the actual real threats to society remain consistently dismissed.

Secondly, the backlash could be framed as tactical because practically no tangible progress has been made on these two fronts – civil marriage and LGBTQI⁹ – rather, ongoing and increasing resistance and hostility. The former is still not legalised and its supporters are demonised, and the latter is criminalised and often pathologised. Thus, debates around these two issues are only galvanised – on demand – to fend off any attempts at building an alternative, secular, and socially equitable system of governance for the country. As materialising and regulating

bodies are conditions for the epidermal state to perform its sovereignty according to Mikdashy (2022), these two issues are primary sites of state sovereignty.

4.3 Atomised backlash

Although backlash in the form of explicit physical violence against individual women politicians is rare in Lebanese politics, the advent of young women – unaffiliated with any political figure, sectarian political party, or family – to parliament in May 2022 unleashed hostile reactions and revealed an array of demeaning practices directed at them. This could be framed as atomised backlash because it targets specific individuals and responds to a novelty or a phenomenon that could be perceived as a win for women – the breakthrough of an independent young woman into a traditional and conservative male-dominated, mostly gerontocratic, institution. Following Townsend-Bell's (2020) framing of backlash as a continuum that ends with overt acts of violence responding to vulnerable communities stepping over an explicit do-not-cross boundary, the existence of young women unaffiliated with any of the usual players on the Lebanese political scene in parliament could be seen as one such boundary. It can also be viewed as an instance of pre-emptive backlash, where the mere existence of young women in parliament is the infraction triggering violence, despite them not carrying out feminist agendas *per se*. Atomised backlash can be divided into two types: backlash against individual women – usually outspoken and visible – in the media and/or politics; and backlash against demands or women's rights and relevant laws.

In a tweet from July 2022, Lebanese MP Cynthia Zarazir (one of the four women 'change MPs' elected to parliament in 2022) revealed repeated incidents of sexual harassment she was subjected to by her male peers in parliament. Zarazir discussed multiple incidents of violation, 'disrespect', and 'harassment' by her fellow MPs over several months following her election (Ghoussoub 2022). Zarazir was the target of a slew of intimidating and demeaning practices, including having her last name mocked and compared to an Arabic word that means cockroaches, being assigned a filthy office in parliament with drawers filled with condoms and issues of *Playboy* magazine, and being denied a parking spot (*ibid.*). For the context of this article, this incident is framed as atomised backlash targeting a particular individual; however, it can also be seen as atomised backlash targeting progress on an issue.

Leading up to the 2022 parliamentary elections, several political parties and even the then newly elected prime minister proposed different women's quota laws (Shibani 2021). Local NGO Fifty-Fifty, which focuses on women's political participation, converged with 50 other organisations and 12 experts to draft a law for a women's parliamentary quota.¹⁰ The proposal, adopted by Inaya Ezzedine, an MP affiliated to the Amal Movement,¹¹ was dismissed in

the joint parliamentary committees' session in October 2021. Ironically, it was MPs belonging to the same parliamentary bloc as Ezzedine who were most staunchly opposed to a discussion about it (Megaphone News 2021). Upon raising the quota issue, MPs decided not to discuss it and promptly moved on to the next item on the agenda under a pretext of limited time. It is worth noting that only eight parliamentarians were ready to sign the proposed bill (El Rahi 2023b). Upon the proposal's dismissal, Ezzedine stormed out of parliament and held a press conference, publicly shaming the MPs for their move (Megaphone News 2021). Ezzedine's statement and the parliament's dismissive attitude triggered a wave of condemnations through statements and online posts from civil society, NGOs, experts, and journalists who had advocated for the quota. All quota proposals since 2005 have been successively dropped.

It is a common practice among the male-dominated political oligarchy in Lebanon to publicly demean women politicians during televised debates, making blatantly sexist and belittling comments referring to their families, sex lives, and looks. While this is not particularly atomised backlash, it remains an insidious practice furthered by the political elite against women politicians across affiliations – part and parcel of Rowley's (2020) 'microscapes of harms' that precede the overtly violent act against them. This practice contributes to silencing these – and other women – from engaging in political debate for fear of being targeted. It is outside the scope of this article to delve into the multiple instances of such practices occurring both in public – parliamentary sessions and television shows – and in private conversations.

5 Conclusion

This article opened with the story of a feminist – Amani El Beaini – which exemplifies some of the multiple forms of hostility and discrimination that women in Lebanon must live with. It also showcases the insidious matrix of patriarchal structures that leave women with few avenues for action. As explored and discussed throughout this article, the exclusion, discrimination, and violence that women in Lebanon face occur in all spheres of life and flow particularly from the domestic sphere – from family systems – and into the social and political institutions and the state. The definition of backlash as a hostile reaction or response to destabilisation in the status quo, hence, does not hold in this context, where violence is pervasive, structural, and embedded in the very systems making up the families, communities, and state of Lebanon.

Even though the exclusion experienced by women in Lebanon cannot be confined to a response, and the fundamental threat to women's rights and gender justice in Lebanon is structural and viciously embedded in the system, there remains clear instances of reactive opposition to particular issues, resistance to individual women, and misogyny that surfaces in response to certain developments. In addition to the pervasive systemic

violence, this article illuminated two forms of backlash against women's rights and gender justice observed in Lebanon. These can be categorised as atomised and tactical backlash. Atomised backlash is reactive violence that targets either individual women in politics or specific women's rights such as the women's quota in parliament and women's political participation. Tactical backlash is also observed – namely on the issues of civil marriage and LGBTQI communities – whereby tensions around these issues are sporadically but systematically stoked and galvanised – on demand – to demonise their supporters and fend off any attempts at building an alternative, secular, and socially equitable system of governance for the country.

Notes

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- 1 Nay El Rahi, Researcher, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon.
- 2 Fatima Antar, Gender Studies Instructor, Lebanese American University and Research Assistant, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon.
- 3 The World Bank had funded (before cancelling it) a water supply augmentation project known as the 'Bisri Dam Project' in the Bisri Valley, 35km south of Beirut. Despite the World Bank's and major politicians' promises that the project would supply residents of Beirut and Mount Lebanon with improved water services, environmental and rights activists as well as landowners in the area opposed it for being an ecological disaster that would use over 6 million square metres of mostly agricultural land to deliver drinking water from a highly contaminated source to the country's capital.
- 4 Article 95 of the Lebanese Constitution states that
The Chamber of Deputies that is elected on the basis of equality between Muslims and Christians shall take the appropriate measures to bring about the abolition of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan. A National Committee shall be formed and shall be headed by the President of the Republic; it includes, in addition to the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the Prime Minister, leading political intellectual and social figures. The task of this Committee shall be to study and propose the means to ensure the abolition of confessionalism, propose them to the Chamber of Deputies and the Council of Ministers, and to follow up the execution of the transitional plan. During the transitional phase: a. The sectarian groups shall be represented in a just and equitable manner in the formation of the Cabinet. b. The principle of confessional representation in public service jobs, in the judiciary, in

the military and security institutions, and in public and mixed agencies shall be cancelled in accordance with the requirements of national reconciliation; they shall be replaced by the principle of expertise and competence. However, Grade One posts and their equivalents shall be excepted from this rule, and the posts shall be distributed equally between Christians and Muslims without reserving any particular job for any sectarian group but rather applying the principles of expertise and competence. (Republic of Lebanon 1926)

This article has not been implemented to date.

- 5 Because each sect regulates the personal status issues of its community with a distinct court and set of laws, the laws governing the personal status affairs of women differ by sect. For instance, Sunni women can be granted custody of their children from 12 years old, while Shiite women can gain custody of their daughters from seven years old, and their sons from two years old.
- 6 Focus group discussion with feminist activists, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon. In February 2022, in the context of the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme, the AIW convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context. This definition was put together collaboratively with the selected feminists who participated in this session.
- 7 The vague term 'unnatural sex' implies every sexual practice that does not involve marital coitus, and thus does not serve the aim of procreation and reproduction of new citizens within a nuclear heterosexual family (i.e. homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, anal sex, etc.).
- 8 Dr El Kaakour was the first woman from Iqlim al-Kharroub to be elected as an MP in 2022. She is particularly invested in Lebanese women's ability to pass down their nationality to their children and is regularly met with criticism from Sunni clerics affiliated with Dar al-Fatwa for her support of civil marriage and a secular state. Ibrahim Mneimneh was elected to one of the Sunni seats in 2022. Known for his advocacy of a secular state and his commitment to addressing social justice issues by being pro-civil marriage and pro-LGBTQI, Mneimneh was met with outrage from Sheikh Hassan Merheb, Deputy Inspector General of Dar al-Fatwa.
- 9 Although Penal Code 534 has not been annulled, there has been a series of progressive judicial rulings in 'unnatural sex' cases. The rulings advocated strongly for the protection of marginalised groups, explicitly emphasising that homosexuality is not criminalised in Lebanon, and demanding investigations be halted to align criminal procedure with fundamental rights, especially the right to privacy and protection from torture. On civil marriage, in 2012, Nidal Darwich and Khoulood Sukkarieh

worked for ten months with civil marriage advocate, Talal Husseini, to exploit a legal loophole to perform a civil ceremony in Lebanon. The then caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel was unable to come up with a reason to avoid registering Nidal and Khoulood's marriage, and they became the first couple in the history of the Arab world to get a civil marriage in their home country. It was not long before the couple started receiving death threats, following a fatwa by the highest Sunni authority in Lebanon, which eventually led them to seek asylum in Sweden (El Rahi 2023b).

- 10 The law stipulates a minimum of 26 out of 128 seats in parliament for women, and at least 40 per cent of names on every political party's candidate list reserved for women.
- 11 The Amal Movement is a Lebanese political party and former militia affiliated with the Shia community. It is the largest Shia party in parliament with 14 MPs. The party has been led by Nabih Berri since 1980. Nabih Berri has been speaker of parliament since 1992.

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