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## **“Playing the Game”: Negotiating the Gendered Subjectivities of Counter-Sectarian Resistance in Beirut**

### **Prologue**

This paper is an unapologetic account of four women’s stories in a game of politics. “The Game” is municipal politics in Beirut in 2016. Like every sidewalk crack and street corner in Lebanon, this “game” is controlled by men of privileged classes who are fathered (pun intended) by sectarianism. The women I spoke to did not get to decide on the rules of “the game,” which were engineered to exclude them, but they played anyway. For them, “the game” is a battlefield, riddled with negotiations, compromises, and an inherited exhaustion. The narrators in this story—Nada, Salma, Rouba and Sahar—enter “the game” with reflexive awareness, an informed sense of agency, and a critical understanding of resistance. But in their attempt to actualize this resistance, they had to play certain cards at different conjunctures in the game—cards that mobilize their gendered subjectivities at times and compromise them at others. They weaponized their bodies and histories as women in politics to achieve their political and symbolic aims. They

practiced this with agency and compromise, and at times, the agency to compromise, the decision to conform, and the tactic to (dis)identify.

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If hegemony is a combination of coercion and consent (Gramsci 1971), then what constitutes resistance? Far from providing an answer to this question, this essay aims to complicate the binaries of conformity and resistance, agency and structure, freedom and domination, through the narratives of four women who have actively participated in formal politics in Beirut. These stories illustrate that there's no such thing as "bad" resistance, even beyond compromise, negotiation, and conformity. Through these experiences, we can begin to draw nuanced theoretical and pragmatic interventions toward an intentional and organized resistance. This work reiterates that structural change is undoubtedly necessary for women's effective political participation in Lebanon on their own terms. In tandem, it builds on the experiences of these women to illustrate that the need for organized resistance efforts is not restricted to a formula, but must occur inside and outside dominant systems, through rejecting them as well as working within them.

By focusing on the ways in which the gendered paradigm of resistance in Lebanon interrupts, redefines, and intersects with sectarian hegemonic structures, this work highlights the ways in which women shape the sites and acts of resistance in their own context. As Lebanese, middle-class, cis-gendered women, my narrators are inherently practicing their political power through a paradigm of gendered citizenship. Their ability to practice their political rights, let alone mobilize a counter-sectarian discourse, is hinged on their active participation in the patriarchal sectarian ideology they are attempting to resist.

By speaking to women who participated in "Beirut Madinati" as political actors, I attempted to understand their subjective experiences with confronting a patriarchal sectarian hegemony, and set out to uncover the possibilities of resisting sectarian hegemony from within its rigid yet fraying contours: What does it mean to resist patriarchal sectarianism for these women who participated in "Beirut Madinati"? How is the practice of resistance for these women conditional, and what are the compromises inherent in the conditions of resistance for women in public politics? What are the strategies and tactics that these women employ to

negotiate patriarchal sectarian power and render their participation in “the game” permissible? How does our understanding of what constitutes resistance transform when approached from a gendered perspective?

## **The Process**

This research is the culmination of four in-person, semi-structured interviews with distinct members of “Beirut Madinati,” including a founding member, a project organizer, a call-center manager, and a candidate. I assigned each narrator a pseudonym at the beginning of the project and refrained from referring to their real name in my notes or written findings. The narrators spoke mostly Arabic but are all fluent in English, and thus occasionally used English words and phrases to state their claims. While the quotes are extracted verbatim from the interviews, the analysis of the interviews is my own interpretation and does not necessarily reflect the narrators’ opinions.

As Lebanese, cis-gendered, educated, and middle-class women, my narrators represent a narrow portion of society and their experiences cannot be generalized across different realities. This research is not meant to essentialize a singular experience of what it means for women to resist sectarian hegemony in Lebanon; it is rather a documentation of individual narratives of resistance in their own subjective and limited contexts. This essay’s demarcated focus on gender identity is not meant as a dismissal of the intersectional complexities of subjectivities in the formal political sphere in Lebanon. I acknowledge that there exist numerous interpretations of gendered resistance located in subjectivity, which complicate any attempt to depict a “reality” of gendered resistance.

More specifically, intersections of race, class, citizenship, sexuality, ability, respectability politics, and dominant conceptions of beauty are not accounted for in this research. These mentions are significant because they are part and parcel of sectarian and patriarchal practices in modern Beirut, which sometimes precede sectarian obstacles or gloss over them, persuade them in various unpredictable directions, and soften or harden a subject’s experiences with sectarianism’s banality. Specifically, this research focuses only on Lebanese citizens through their encounters with sectarian hegemony but does not account for the common marginalization

of non-citizens, migrants, and refugees, or include the patterns of power mongering that a myriad of non-dominant groups encounters daily in modern Beirut.

## **Game Play**

*Rule #1: If your purpose is to “win” the game, you must fit its age, gender, class, sect, and demography guidelines*

### **Nada**

Sectarianism is a sickness. From before the Lebanese Independence, even back to the Ottomans, everything political included sects and sectarianism. To this day, in every political, social, or economic association, and all public sectors, sectarianism dictates everything; it became rooted in the Lebanese fabric. The Ta'if was supposed to erase political sectarianism, but instead it ensured the division of the Lebanese public through the myth of difference. This affected groups differently, and for those of us who are already “other,” it played on our identities to separate us even more. By creating “Beirut Madinati,” we wanted to shake sectarianism from within, to show them that we are here, and organized, and can do their job better than they have been doing it.

Nada’s opinions are bold and unapologetic. The pronounced frowns or nods that decorate her face as she listens reveal her position on the discourse before she utters it. Nada has been involved in Lebanese public politics for decades; As one of the founding members of “Beirut Madinati,” and a member of its steering committee, Nada was responsible for making strategic decisions regarding the movement’s political agenda and the actualization of its ideological program on the ground. Nada remarked that “Beirut Madinati”’s choice to challenge sectarian hegemony on the municipal level was a deliberate one. The immediate reason was that the municipal elections, at the time, were the only democratic elections meant to occur in Beirut in the near future. Furthermore, in contrast to the parliamentary composition, municipal councils in Lebanon have no sectarian quotas, which entails that cross-sectarian alliances are possible and encouraged.

However, Nada explains how the officially non-sectarian nature of the municipal electoral system is rendered more complicated in practice. This is because individuals are restricted to run and vote only in their official district of origin, which is dictated through

patriarchal designations (Moawad 2018) taking after the father's place of origin for men and unmarried women, and after the husband for married women (Abu-Rish 2016). Therefore, even though municipal politics are officially non-sectarian, they are made sectarian by a patriarchal lineage system and a prevailing sectarian spatial politics. For women, this system dictates their citizenship and marks it as gendered, wherein "men control women's placement in family registries and women cannot exist as citizens outside their relationship to their fathers and husbands" (Moawad 2018: 5). This informal insertion of patriarchal sectarian hegemony onto a non-sectarian municipal politics marks one of the complexities through which gender and sect are inextricably linked categories in determining women's citizenship and its political application.

To contextualize Nada's description of sectarianism, in Lebanon, the reproduction of patriarchal kinship structures goes hand in hand with the sectarian state-building agenda controlled by elite men (Joseph 1997). When family relations are at the center of political and civic life, the existence of patriarchal values becomes codified, normalized, and central to the way politics is done in every sphere. This means that males and elders are privileged over females and young men and women (ibid, 79). Through a system of "care and control" (Joseph 2003: 153) enforced by the political elites, the ability for Lebanese citizens to provision their material lives and obtain fundamental services (Narotzky 2005) is hinged on their identity constructions through a patriarchal kinship paradigm. These gendered discourses exacerbate the power inequalities and discrimination practices between men and women, demarcating women's political participation, where any attempt to cross these boundaries becomes a site of struggle. This essay's concern is how women intentionally push these boundaries to situate themselves in public politics on their own terms.

In practice, this system posed a challenge for "Beirut Madinati" as a self-proclaimed non-sectarian campaign that operated through political participation in sectarian politics. Therefore, "Beirut Madinati" had to choose its candidates strategically, by assigning Sunni candidates to Sunni voter demographics, Maronite Christians to Christian-dominated areas, etc. And although their list was intentionally equally divided along gender lines, half of the candidates being men and the other half women, these gender discrepancies had to align with sect and demography. In

choosing “Beirut Madinati”’s list of candidates, the founding members utilized their immediate social networks, word-of-mouth, and a thorough vetting process to secure viable candidates, who not only had a “clean record” and a “stellar reputation,” but who also met sectarian guidelines. Hence, even if listing a Sunni woman prospect were more qualified than her male Sunni counterpart, the “reality” dictated that the demographic population is more likely to support a male candidate.

As “Beirut Madinati” rose to popularity, some of its members became occupied with the possibility of winning and intended to join the race for power, even while others, like Nada, remained determined to uproot sectarian discourse. For the women in the movement, that meant a return to the normative civil society discourse that relegates gender issues to the back end of political movements, instead of treating patriarchy and sectarianism as inextricable entities that work together to maintain hegemonic oppression. Nada described the struggle for “Beirut Madinati” as a movement that aimed to challenge sectarianism’s hegemony through political participation but could not snub the political realities it was attempting to resist. The effective implementation of “Beirut Madinati”’s formal ideology in an urban space dictated by patriarchal sectarianism’s informal cracks proved challenging in practice:

There’s a reality on the ground—you cannot send “Ali Haidar” to Achrafieh. We had to consider sectarian rules to have a place in politics, and that meant we had to make some sacrifices, while staying true to our ideology.

Nada’s statements crystallize how “Beirut Madinati”’s process of claims-making was modified at different political conjunctures during its encounter with patriarchal sectarianism’s spatial territorialization. As demonstrated through the instances Nada narrates, civil society movements that attempt to challenge the sectarian system are exposed to everyday forms of institutional violence or threats of violence from the patriarchal sectarian system. Often, vulnerable groups and non-dominant positionalities are at the center of this violence, paying the cost of an “archaic bureaucracy” (Moawad 2018: 5) they did not participate in creating. Evident from Nada’s narrative is that abiding by the game’s hegemonic rules is not constructive to actualizing change. Moving forward, it is important for movements that form as sites of resistance to re-frame the rules of the game instead of reproducing them. Further, as Nada

professes, if “winning” comes at the expense of effecting change, then winning should not be the primary goal, and the definition of what counts as a “win” should be re-examined.

*Rule #2: You must rely on a gendered performativity to gain access to the game*

## **Salma**

My voice is very rough, and most people mistake me for a man over the phone. Since I was running the call center for “Beirut Madinati,” I would sometimes not correct potential voters who thought they were speaking to a man. Through my participation in alternative politics, I had to constantly consider my audience—mostly patriarchal and sectarian—and understand their political ideologies. When I made a call, I had to negotiate.

Salma spoke with a matter of fact, sarcastic ease. She reviewed her words as she voiced them, poking at each statement until it laid its core purpose, and paused only to take a long drag of her cigarette. She found in “Beirut Madinati” a space to rest her faith in the change she had been carrying in her head throughout her life. Throughout our conversation, Salma discussed the negotiations she had to perform in order to participate in a male-dominated political public sphere, including the way she presented herself depending on the context with which she was engaging as a political actor. Salma’s deliberated choices, such as choosing not to correct people who mistook her for a man, marks her body as a site of politics tangled with the centrality of her gendered performance (Sandoval 2000). This performative process weaponizes Salma’s voice as a card in “the game,” which she utilizes as a tactic for resistance.

We refused to compromise, but there is a reality, a stubborn sectarian fact, that we encountered and had to consider practically, but not ideologically. In practice, we had to be realistic if we were to make any real difference. However, our compromises had limits, both personally and on the campaign level. I adjusted my principles but never let them go. As a movement, we refused to be allied with sectarian parties. An alliance with sectarianism is like saying: “so the Nazis are recreating their mission and inventing a new oppositional ideology, let’s join forces with them for change.” You can’t, as a civil society movement, join forces with war criminals, with parties whose entire ideology is based on the obliteration of the other, no matter what their present ideology and political practice is.

The malleability of Salma's claims-making, located in her subjectivity as a woman in politics, is far from implying that she is oppressed or subordinated (Joseph 2012). Her intentional negotiation with the obstacles she encountered marks her subjectivity as relational, that is, constantly shifting depending on the interaction and expectation (ibid, 16). Salma, who possesses a keen awareness of herself and a commitment to her political beliefs, practices a tactical subjectivity that gears "the game's" rules to her advantage, and employs the dominant public's perception of her to further her political resistance. The "compromises" that Salma made throughout her involvement with "Beirut Madinati" were a result of choices she adopted with intentionality. Far from bowing to patriarchal sectarian hegemony, Salma understood how her access to "the game" necessitates a certain performance and symbolically conformed to these rules to structurally undermine them.

Here, patriarchal sectarian hegemony is not a solid totality, but rather a relational matrix (Mitchell 1988, 9) comprised of moving parts. Depending on each encounter, the conditions of resistance and the subjects carrying out this resistance must transform. Salma's actions reveal the implicit practices through which patriarchal sectarianism ensures its control over the quotidian lives of women, and simultaneously how this control is negotiable and possible to undermine. Yet, the gendered power relations which privilege men dictate that women must be the "more pliable" subjects (Joseph 2012)—the ones willing to bend over backwards merely to step foot in "the game."

Salma describes herself as an activist, and when I asked her what that meant, she said, "being an activist simply means that you are intentionally active." This recurring theme of "intentionality" has been theorized by feminist scholars in the region. Specifically, Suad Joseph distinguishes between agency, which happens in the aftermath of action, and intentionality, which precedes action and carries it through (2012: 2). This distinction is helpful for the work of women who participate in political resistance, where the loose boundary between agency and conforming to structure can be drawn by intentionality. In Salma's case, the intimacy of her interactions in the public sphere meant that she had to maneuver her positionality through a practice of agentic conformity—one that is driven by intentionality.



Salma's narrative asserts that there is not one way to resist, but intentionality must be carried throughout. Rather, feminist activists (and those who choose not to call themselves that) need to be in many places at once—one where they gain access to “the game” and represent women's needs from within, and another where they work structurally and withdraw from “the game's” rigid terms. Neither approach is more significant, but merging them can help these women come together with their diverse practices, tactics, and knowledge, to work in solidarity for ensuring women's political participation, on their own terms.

*Rule # 3: You must maintain a complete awareness of sectarianism's structures and your place in it at all times*

## **Rouba**

I entered “Beirut Madinati” with skepticism. But for me, it was way more important to be involved in the campaign and improve its program through participating in it than not to be a part of it at all. I had a huge issue with how we practiced politics. I felt like we were playing the game—choosing a few families and experts, even though the approach could have been truly local politics. Gender, expertise, and sect were major factors in decision-making. Still, what we were missing was actual representation of the people of this city and its socioeconomic and geographic constituencies. I really tried to convince people in Mar Mikhayel, where I live, to run as candidates. But people were scared to run with “Beirut Madinati” and lose their sectarian ties. When they were willing to run, I went to the steering committee with suggestions of candidates and their response was: “who is she? What does she do? Where's her CV?” I said, “she has a store in Mar Mikhayel.”

Rouba's presence is commanding and assertive; she diplomatically takes up space while ensuring that it remains open and shared. Throughout our conversation, she repeatedly stated that “the devil lies in the details,” which she exemplified with the precision and nuance of her responses. Possessing a range of skills and strategic knowledge, Rouba found ways to merge her engineering background with her activity in public politics, which began in her college days. Since then, she has offered her dynamic contribution to several movements in Beirut, including “Naqabati”—the civil society movement in the Beirut Syndicate of Engineers Elections—and “Beirut Madinati.” Throughout her fifteen years of experience, Rouba remarked how her feminism was crucial to her survival in male-dominated fields:

I consider myself a person who has consistently been obliged to deal with the fact that I am a woman in society, to the extent that it necessitates that I am a feminist. From home

to work to my participation in these political movements, I have had to deal with being a woman. From my family upbringing to my relationships with men, my being a woman is constantly present and I have always battled with it because I reject being put in a box. I feel like my feminism is an awareness and conviction shaped by experience.

Inevitably, Rouba's positionality as a woman was always present in her work. Despite her unease with the webs of judgment that spun her gendered identity, she chose to invest in her identities as "tactics." According to the hegemonic relations she consciously found herself in, Rouba situated herself as a "player" in "the game" that has historically worked to control her body and psyche. In other words, Rouba excavates and contributes to an "oppositional consciousness" (Sandoval 2000) throughout her political participation, where she challenges dominant ideology while consciously utilizing any and every aspect of it to her advantage. Accordingly, she says:

I actually felt very strong because I know how to say things in meetings or run things in ways that are not threatening to anyone, that don't step on anyone's ego, and I think this is because I am a woman. Because I've never felt entitled to go scream at a room full of people. So, on the contrary, I feel like this characteristic really empowered me. I usually play the role of mediator and an invisible organizing engine, so my being a woman really helped with this. At times, I did feel conscious that I'm playing this card when I met with government officials, for example. Not that I went to those meetings with a plan to employ this characteristic, but I would become aware that I am using it during the meeting.

As a member of "Beirut Madinati," Rouba faced internal challenges when she was confronted with the reality of political resistance, in its consideration of the formal hegemonic rules that actively exclude her. However, as Rouba remarked, her experience as a woman with "Beirut Madinati" was far from disempowering, as she found power in conformity and a strategical agency in the lessons she archived throughout her life as a woman. Nevertheless, as in Salma's case, the burden of negotiating these expressions of selfhood remains disproportionately placed on women, in ways that men who dominate the public political sphere never have to consider. Like Rouba, the women I spoke to have a keen awareness of themselves, of the public sphere, their surroundings, and of politics. As Rouba explained, having to be hyperaware of herself and her surroundings at all times is inherent in her being a woman:

In “Naqabati,” I was the campaign coordinator, so I was basically in the highest position. Still, there was a total trespass and disregard of my abilities. For example, we’d be in a meeting where I’m trying to prove—not even prove, but I had something to say, and a man in his forties would start referring to me as “the flower sitting with us on the table.” So suddenly there’s a dismissal of who I am, and the negotiations flood my mind: do I play his game and smile at him, so he can feel like he’s flirting with a woman, so I can proceed with my work and get things done in the meeting? Sometimes when I would have an appearance in the media, I would become afraid or wary because I don’t want to be judged as this “flower.” I would try to dress in certain ways that contradict how I usually dress or what I like to wear, which might be seen as “too revealing,” and I would choose not to dress like that so that I wouldn’t be discredited or dismissed.

Are the performative choices that Rouba had to make a practice of self-censorship or a practice of claiming power? According to Rouba, it’s a combination of both. As the rules of “the game” dictate, Rouba maintained a complete awareness of herself and the hegemonic processes she was called to identify with. Her choices were not fixed, but rather evolved from the positions she found herself in throughout “the game”:

I was very tactical in how to negotiate what aspects of myself and my beliefs to show or what not to show, because I know how different our political opinions and outlooks may be even if we share the same struggle. But there were interruptions that were extremely demotivating. For instance, I had been working so hard for a year and a half, and this man who is a leader in the community would come in one minute and erase all of my efforts. There is a huge burden on women in politics that is disproportionate to men. We are constantly under surveillance, every move is watched, and there’s a constant negotiation of our positionality and especially if we continue to lead the battle. It is through politics that this is made more apparent, but it is constant.

Here, Rouba (dis)identifies (Muñoz 1999) with patriarchal sectarian hegemony by situating herself both within and against its various discourses. She challenges the binary of female/male by understanding the structural and systemic construction of her “place” as a woman and negotiating it as a form of resistance. Rouba feels that she is equipped with alternative forms of power that allow her to battle men’s toxic power in ways that men in politics often lack. In other words, Rouba self-consciously intervenes in normative discourse, at times by “putting men in their place,” and other times by not intervening at all.

Despite her belief that “Beirut Madinati” was able to shift the public attitudes of political participation in the favor of a more gender-inclusive culture, Rouba remarks that this shift is not sufficient to bring about real change: ““Beirut Madinati” should put all of its effort in grassroots politics, but for it to do that, it needs to shed its skin—for starters, it needs to speak Arabic [laughs]. I had a feminist vision on politics, which is grassroots, long term and accumulative work. It was attacked, even if not publicly, but it didn’t have a support system; it was more like, “you go play on the ground in neighborhoods.” But it was never taken seriously, it was even found threatening.”

*Rule #4: You must be granted permission from multiple entities to run as a candidate in “the game”*

## **Sahar**

I never thought I would ever run for elections in any way. I wasn’t even a class president in school! I had a lot of excitement to be in a position that has impact in a battle that seemed important to me at the time. The biggest accomplishment for me was when I stood at a meeting for my family. I had to make a speech and invite people and convince them to vote for me. I don’t have many family relations and I don’t know how to do these things. The family organized the meeting on my behalf. I get to the auditorium and there are around sixty to seventy men, 55-years-old and older. I stood on stage and I saw the shock on their faces— “It’s you? You’re the candidate?”

Sahar expresses herself with a gentle resolve that conveys her resilience. She portrays her passion and active engagement with an unassuming aptitude. Sahar joined “Beirut Madinati” after having been active in the 2015 uprising that stemmed from Lebanon’s wretched garbage crisis, where she engaged in public debates and organized protests that she considered the driving force of “Beirut Madinati”’s formation as a campaign. Sahar’s narrative is indicative of the muddled overlap between the personal and political, private and public realms for women. Through her role as a candidate for “Beirut Madinati,” Sahar had to negotiate with patriarchal kinship within her own family as well as with the normative public(s):

I stood and spoke about “Beirut Madinati.” This was a very empowering moment for me, to stand in front of the whole family as a female candidate, for the first time in the family’s history. *The* candidate from my family is usually a male and a lawyer who has always been supported by a sectarian party. And there I was—a leftist non-sectarian young woman. Usually, they would never listen to me, they wouldn’t give me a space to

Speak or ask my thoughts on politics, because I'm a woman and in their opinion, too young. But through the campaign, I made them listen to me.

Here, I return to Suad Joseph (1993), who terms what Sahar describes as a “patriarchal connectivity”—relationally oriented feminine (and masculine) selves organized according to gender and age hierarchy (466). As a young female candidate, Sahar not only challenged “the game's” rules but also the patriarchal connectivity that upheld her family. Time and time again, these struggles pose a significant, often individual burden on women who find themselves having to prove their capabilities to their in-group as well as the male-dominated public. This weight is often exacerbated by the ways in which patriarchal sectarianism allows for the establishment of rules which are socially sanctioned (Burawoy 2012: 189) by the hegemonic structures, as well as ensured by gendered sectarian subjects who have internalized patriarchal sectarian practices (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]), to the extent of embodiment at the level of identity.

In reflecting on her experience with “Beirut Madinati,” Sahar remarked that unlike her male counterpart, she had to be granted permission from multiple entities to participate in the political battle—not only did she give herself that permission, but she also had to “earn it” from her family, the movement, as well as the general public. Sahar's positionality as a female candidate represents the multi-layered rejection that women face when they attempt to pierce a macro, family-run politics that is reproduced and propagated on the micro-level of her own family. When I asked her whether she felt supported by her family during the elections, Sahar responded:

I think if the male lawyer in my family were running against me, none of the family would have shown up, they would go to him. The ones who create the system and are immersed in it and practice politics within it are the men. If you don't know how to play their game, you won't get people's votes. I was fortunate that my family gave me support, but actually, they gave me permission, almost. They didn't help with campaigning or financing or hanging banners. I asked my father if he told my uncle that I'm running, he said “no, I forgot,” and my uncle voted for someone else.

Though empowering on the personal level, Sahar's political participation with “Beirut Madinati” grew disenchanting and tiring, as she recalled:

While you were talking, I remembered a situation very clearly, like a flashback. “Beirut Madinati” was ready to publicize its list of candidates, and we were choosing which candidate should be the head of the list. This is a very uncomfortable position, between a highly qualified female candidate and a man. Even though she received more votes internally when we all voted, the man was chosen. This is where the campaign dismissed its resistance ideology and went back to its commitment to the system—the head of the list had to be a man, Sunni, and an engineer, because apparently, that’s who people would vote for. This was the first thing that happened when I joined, and I left the meeting in tears. For me, she was more suitable, not only because she’s a woman, but she’s qualified and has the right personality and background. But also, *because* she is a woman, because we are fighting a sectarian patriarchal battle and the campaign was meant to shatter the systemic norms. She wasn’t chosen, simply because she *is* a woman.

Each of my narrators spoke about the whiplash disappointment they felt when “Beirut Madinati” decided to nominate a male candidate who fit the gender, sect, age, profession, and demography criteria with which hegemonic sectarianism exercises its exclusionary practices. Not only was this anticlimactic for the campaign’s oppositional ideology as a whole, but it was even more disillusioning considering that a highly qualified female candidate was internally selected through a democratic process. While the implicit and micro aggressive reproduction of hegemonic formal rules was evident to the conscious and tactical members of “Beirut Madinati,” the verdict to refrain from challenging patriarchal sectarian hegemony with a non-normative candidate served as an explicit act of consenting to dominant discourse, which reinforces the notion that there is no place for women in Lebanese politics:

Especially as women in politics, there’s a lack of support for us. I am certain that men don’t even have better skills or are better political actors, but they have more exposure, experience, and practice in public politics. We don’t have a space in public politics. I say public, because of course women have experience practicing politics in the private sphere, but we’re not given the space in public, in how to shape opinions, how you address the media. We don’t have the social support either—we are questioned every step of the way. Only 6 women out of 113 who ran for parliamentary elections made it. So, it’s not enough to say that women should run on lists, because political participation should not happen in a vacuum. Even if they run, they don’t make it because of many intersectional issues and barriers that are designed to stand in their way. And even if they make it, they don’t have equal power, or high-level positions in decision-making.

Sahar outwardly rejects the liberal discourse that points to the mere presence of women in politics as a step forward toward inclusion and away from patriarchal hegemony. According to her, this discourse fails to criticize sectarian and patriarchal power structurally or ensure effective

women's political participation, so it remains symbolic. Though the spectrum of activism and political resistance movements in Lebanon, on the ground, is led by capable and passionate women, the perceived need for oppositional movements to abide by "the game's" rules produces an intensifying de-politicization of resistance. This, in turn, de-mobilizes non-sectarian opposition, leading to the impermissibility of resistance for women whose exclusion is historically produced and reproduced by a lech for hegemonic power.

## **Closing**

The women who participated in "Beirut Madinati" as political actors faced a long series of refusals, threats, and obstacles that they were driven to accommodate in their effort to enter and operate within patriarchal sectarian spaces. Not only did their resistance require a careful and thorough understanding of sectarian realities and rules in urban Beirut, but they also had to consider sectarian divisions, guidelines, and regulations in order to maintain their existence as political actors, let alone resist sectarianism. Their experiences indicate the necessity to reconceptualize how we do politics, to uproot structures that reproduce the marginalization of women across their spheres of influence, and to re-examine the true meaning of "women's political participation" in Lebanon.

What we learn from these narratives as feminist activists is that our drive must be intentional, in which we must set our own rules to "the game" that we know and have studied so well. We already know the challenges, we already know that our every move is constrained, and we know that the system needs structural change before we can achieve participation on our own terms. But this reality should not discourage us from continuing to resist in each space we penetrate and in our own ingenious ways. We need to be everywhere—inside, outside, and around the system. We need to talk and listen to each other and continue to learn from the experiences of those who preceded us. Power cannot be conceived as an external relation taking place between pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves (Mouffe 1979). As evident through the narratives of the women who participated in this research, a movement's resistance is created through and within the standpoint positionalities of its members.

The revelations of this research aim to bridge the gaps between feminist theorization and practice and political claims-making in Lebanon—toward an intersectional understanding of what it means to resist. Through theory and practice and their intentional documentation into a historical portfolio of resistance, we can begin to narrow the gap, until we pinpoint the right time to bridge it entirely. By using the dominant structures to our advantage, we are not failing, but rather changing the game. We start by agreeing that the rules of politics in Lebanon have to change, and we must find new ways to “play the game.” Whether it be lobbying for quotas for women’s participation, boycotting the elections, or fighting to reach the top, we must constantly thrive to create networks, activist infrastructures, and guiding coalitions to continue etching at the concrete edifice of patriarchal sectarian hegemony.

\* An Arabic version of this paper was published in the “[Gendered Resistance Publication](#)”

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