

# **Feminist Movement Building in Lebanon: Challenges and opportunities**

Catherine Moughalian, Zeina Ammar

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For more information and to comment on this report, you can contact the authors on:

[Catherine.moughalian@gmail.com](mailto:Catherine.moughalian@gmail.com)

[zeina.ammar05@gmail.com](mailto:zeina.ammar05@gmail.com)

## Consultants' current and past affiliations with feminist groups

Catherine Moughalian was a member of Meem until its closing and has been co-founder and member of Dammeh since December 2014. She was a paid staff member at the A-project from July 2015 to August 2016 and from September 2017 to July 2018.

Zeina Ammar was a co-founder and member of Dammeh from December 2014 until August 2018. She was a paid staff member at The A Project from September 2016 until September 2017 and continues to conduct paid freelance work for The A Project, such as transcription, translation, and organising and facilitating reading retreats on The Politics of Mental Health.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IWD	International Women's Day
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
WRO	Women's Rights Organization
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
NCLW	National Commission for Lebanese Women
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development

## Terminology

**Feminist:** For the purposes of this paper, a feminist is anyone or any organization who identifies as such or does not identify with the label yet challenges gender injustice through their work, activism, or everyday life.

**Participants:** refers to interviewees and when specified otherwise, to the attendees of the collective learning sessions.

**Trans\*:** an umbrella term referring to all non-conforming and non-cisgender identities, which include, but are not limited to, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, non-binary, agender, transmen, transwomen and genderfluid identities.

## Executive summary

Women's rights organizations (WROs) and feminist movements have largely been credited for social change and the promotion of gender justice. However, they continue to face enormous challenges as they remain grossly underfunded and face resistance and constant backlash. In this paper, we start from the understanding that movement building is crucial for social change and strengthening feminist collective action is at the heart of our fight for gender justice.

As part of the efforts that have been made over the past two years within the RootsLab pilot program in Lebanon – a partnership between FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund, Global Fund for Women, Oxfam and Young Foundation – this study seeks to provide learning around supporting feminist activism and movement building in the country. Our analysis explores key characteristics of feminist organizing in Lebanon through the lens of movement building.

Drawing on data from 30 in-depth interviews with feminists, we attempt to answer the following research questions: What dynamics are shaping the growth of the feminist movement in Lebanon? How can activists, supporters and allies challenge existing patterns that hinder the growth of the movement and nurture those that instead foster movement building?

We identified three main trends of feminist action in the country: reformist, radical, and state feminism; though the latter is not relevant to our movement building lens and is therefore not analysed further.

Activists from both reformist and radical groups expressed a sense of belonging to a feminist movement, recognizing the existence of a long legacy of feminist organizing in Lebanon which preceded them; continuous advocacy efforts related to gender justice; the presence of a diverse and vibrant feminist scene; and emerging practices of solidarity and intersectionality. A common concern emerged, however, regarding the capacity of the movement to grow larger and stronger. Nevertheless, a readiness and desire to collectively work on devising solutions for these challenges was apparent.

In view of the framework adopted in this research, we present an analysis of the dynamics and trends that shape feminist movement building in Lebanon:

- **Contextual and Structural tensions:** The politico-socio-economic context and shrinking civic space pose several challenges to organizing, particularly for marginalized communities of refugee, migrant and trans\* activists. Generally, people find it difficult to sustain their activism due to the draining nature of the work, which hinders movement building efforts. Despite a general sense of fatigue, feminists see value in being part of networks where collective care and solidarity can be practiced. A multiplicity of groups has emerged in recent years along with an increasingly accessible feminist discourse reaching new audiences and integrating other social movements.

- **Resources and Power:** The limited funds available for feminist and women's rights groups are often inflexible and short-term, with donor agendas remaining distant from movement priorities. Funding is also often concentrated within more established and reformist WROs, allowing them to expand their resources and power at the expense of smaller radical-leaning groups. This translates into less opportunities for collaboration and more fragmented work and in turn limits the movement's collective power to make demands and challenge donor agendas. Feminist donors and funders are commended for their politics, participatory approaches and core and flexible funding, often to younger groups. Nevertheless, concerns around unrecognized power dynamics between funders and grantees were raised, along with critiques of their local advisory processes that sometimes create power imbalances within the movement itself. Finally, in response to such challenges, some radical actors have chosen alternative models of organizing, though they remain the most challenged in terms of securing resources.
- **Centralized Organizing:** The feminist movement is highly centralized in Beirut. Unlike radical actors, reformists have access to greater resources, and therefore a greater capacity to widen their reach. However, they approach the communities in the regions outside of Beirut as service beneficiaries rather than fellow organizers. Most groups lack deliberate and serious efforts to build bridges with activists outside Beirut, but in cases when such interactions do occur, as in the case of RootsLab, the dynamics are both positive and promising.
- **Intersectionality, Solidarity and Coalition Building:** Deliberate efforts of practicing intersectionality and solidarity have emerged amongst radical feminist actors, with a positive shift away from single-issue organizing. Recent years have also been characterized by attempts at sustained coalition-building between feminist groups, though their success was sometimes contested and an overall sense of defeat was expressed. Still, the need for coalitions and solidarity networks was unanimous, though the basis for inclusion in such coalitions and networks remains unclear.
- **Leadership and Power Sharing:** Decision making power is restricted to few influential figures. This is most evident in hierarchical organizations but also inadvertently manifested in attempted flat structures. A high concentration of skills, knowledge, and opportunities among a few key figures in the feminist movement prevents newcomers or less experienced activists from feeling empowered to make decisions within their groups, let alone to influence the direction of the feminist movement.
- **Accountability:** The difficulty of envisioning and establishing fair and effective accountability processes hinders feminists' ability to overcome past and emerging conflicts and stifles intergenerational learning.

Drawing on interviewees' confidence in the future of the movement and their evident willingness to open new channels of communication and collaboration, we identified key priorities and ways forward for the movement:

1. **Moving towards a people-centred approach**, through actively investing in constituencies as activists and community organizers in their own right, while facilitating a wider access to tools and resources that would support their organizing.
2. **Investing in inclusive spaces for debates amongst groups and activists**, around differences in politics, values, and approaches to allow feminist actors to impact each other's work and build towards a shared political vision.
3. These discussions constitute a first step towards scoping potential collaborations and **building meaningful and strong alliances** across groups and with other movements with intersecting priorities.

## Introduction

Women's rights organizations (WROs) and feminist movements have largely been credited for social change and the promotion of gender justice around the world. However, they continue to face enormous challenges, as they remain grossly and chronically underfunded<sup>1</sup>, and face resistance and constant backlash<sup>2</sup>. Within this increasingly challenging economic and political context, feminist movements and organizations around the world have adopted a variety of strategies, tactics, and practices in addressing injustice and oppression. Their experiences are diverse and the external and internal dynamics that shape their struggles for survival and sustainability are complex.

In the same way, organizations working on women's rights and feminist issues in Lebanon vary in structure, size, interventions, and approaches. This diversity makes any assessment of the state of the feminist movement, its strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, a complex undertaking. The question of what can be considered feminist imposes itself throughout the research process, from the sampling stage to suggestions for a way forward.

As an active attempt to accommodate the existing diversity within women's groups in Lebanon, this paper does not restrict feminism to the authors' personal definitions and practices but rather grounds itself in the collected data and looks at feminist activism and organizing in all its diversity. For the purposes of this paper, a feminist is anyone or any organization who identifies as such or does not identify with the label yet challenges gender injustice through their work, activism, or everyday life; from formal and established organizations to young and grassroots activism by non-established and unregistered groups, independent initiatives and activists, as well as university clubs, within and outside of Beirut. This definition is an intentional decision not to erase or discard any type of feminism, and has the advantage of capturing a wide array of perspectives which can then be critically assessed through the lens of movement building and strengthening.

As part of the efforts that have been made over the past two years within the RootsLab pilot program in Lebanon – a partnership between FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund, Global Fund for Women, Oxfam and Young Foundation – this study seeks to provide learning around supporting feminist activism and movement building in the country. RootsLab brought together a large number of actors and organizations in the feminist movement in Lebanon<sup>3</sup>, with the aim of supporting young feminist activists and organizers in designing and testing out innovative initiatives for social change. The study was conducted in parallel with the evaluation of the pilot program.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the wider state of feminist organizing in Lebanon while looking at the different dynamics shaping feminist movement building. Through this work, we hope to spark critical conversations and dialogues, and inspire new initiatives and more in-depth research. The questions we asked, the interviews and sessions conducted, and the reflection and analysis we present are also attempts to support us, as feminist activists and organizers, on our journey of revisiting our current



strategies, in an effort to create new ones that could strengthen our movement. While existing literature on feminism in Lebanon focuses predominantly on its history, and although opinion pieces around the future of feminism in the country do exist, to our knowledge, none of the data-driven studies provide an analytical framework that could be used to devise a roadmap for movement strengthening. This outlook on the current and future direction of the movement, along with the movement building lens and the adoption of a broad and inclusive definition of feminist action in the country, are conceived as the three key areas through which this research adds value.

Drawing on activists' narratives and assessment of the movement as well as our own – as researchers who personally identify as feminist activists and have been engaged in the movement for the past ten years – we will first attempt to characterize feminist activism and organizing in Lebanon. We reflect on the current state of the movement, and the different actors, approaches, and areas of interventions involved. In the second section, we present some of the dynamics that currently nurture or hinder movement building. Finally, we explore key priorities for the future that can serve as a roadmap for feminist organizers, women's rights defenders, and allies to support and strengthen movement building.

## **Methodology**

### **Research questions**

The RootsLab Lebanon pilot has already provided valuable learning around supporting young feminist activism, in its efforts to challenge specific patterns that hinder feminist movement building. Starting from the belief that strong feminist movements are the most defining and influential factor in achieving gender justice and social change, RootsLab brought together ten teams of feminist activists from across Lebanon to engage in a collective journey to develop their ideas, test out their initiatives, and collaborate across different struggles.

Building on the experience and learnings from RootsLab, this paper explores the following questions:

1. What are the existing and emerging dynamics that are shaping the growth of the feminist movement in Lebanon?
2. How can activists, supporters, and allies challenge existing patterns that hinder the growth of the movement, and nurture and encourage those that instead foster movement building?

### **Insider methodology and positionality**

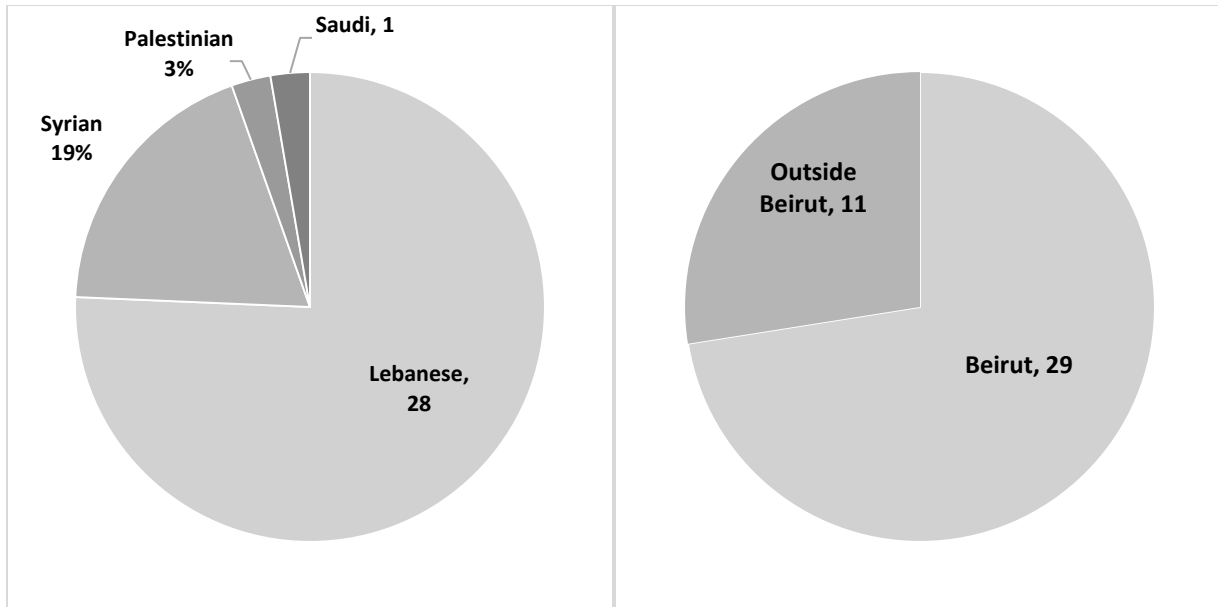
Rather than applying a distant scholarly "observer" lens, this piece adopts an insider research methodology, whereby we ourselves, as researchers, are part of the feminist movement in Lebanon. As activists with a long history of involvement in past and present feminist groups and spaces, we were in a unique position to interview activists and academics and to write about the current state of feminist organizing.

Most interviewees welcomed the opportunity to reflect and comment on their experiences within the movement and on the diversity of approaches present within it. Some expressed hesitance, however, and raised questions over the involvement of the researchers in feminist groups in Lebanon, which reflects our positionalities and potential bias. Recognizing, as per feminist research principles, that no knowledge is ever objective, we acknowledge the implications of our own experiences as well as the fact that we inevitably have a certain degree of bias. We will make a conscious effort to examine our assumptions and state them explicitly where relevant, and will let the stories of the interviewees speak for themselves. We do not claim objectivity in the analysis and interpretations, and state explicitly that we have used our familiarity and knowledge of dynamics within and amongst groups, organizations, and individuals to interpret the data.

### **Sample and data collection**

The findings of this report are based on in-depth semi-structured interviews that allowed for the complexity and diversity of opinions to emerge. The interview questions were broad, leaving room for interviewees to tell their stories and experiences, and determine priorities and areas of focus. We were interested in biographical self-description that would allow us to grasp the participants' experiences of feminisms and their socio-cultural contexts, while allowing input from the interviewees on the questions themselves. Elements from the participants' interviews conducted for the RootsLab pilot evaluation were also analysed and integrated in this research paper.

Over a period of two months (March and April 2019), we conducted a total of thirty in-depth interviews with forty-one feminists who are either currently active in feminist groups and/or collectives or are independent activists. Eighteen out of the thirty interviews were with participants of the RootsLab evaluation. Participants were diverse in years of experience within the feminist movement - ranging from two to thirty-eight years of experience – type of involvement (employee in WROs, member of a collective, or independent activists or researchers), nationality, area of residence, gender identity, and issues of interest. Respondents worked on diverse issues including gender-based violence, custody issues, masculinities, sexual and reproductive health and rights, nationality and citizenship, economic rights, women's political participation, feminist capacity-building and advocacy. With the consent of the interviewees, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized, and recordings were deleted after transcription.



*Figure 1. Nationalities and Area of Residence of Respondents*

As an acknowledgement of the authors' bias, and in the spirit of collectively developing our feminist narratives and experiences of movement building, the initial findings of the report and the themes that emerged were discussed and explored further in two collective learning sessions, to which all interviewees were invited, in addition to other activists from the feminist movement. The sessions followed a dialogical approach, placing the focus on mutual understanding of each other's' contexts and life experiences. Feedback and emerging insights were integrated into the findings of the report, and where disagreements on conclusions existed, multiple conclusions are presented.

Interviewees and participants of the co-learning sessions were identified based on our knowledge of and experience in feminist activism in Lebanon. Given the limited time within which the study was conducted, the report is not fully representative of all viewpoints within the feminist movement, and its conclusions should be read given this limitation. Rather than being an in-depth study, the report is a snapshot of current views and challenges, suggestions of ways forward, and potentials for collective action. Additionally, in an effort to make space for new voices, we reached out to less "usual" suspects and intentionally involved activists whose voices are not as loud, visible, and well represented as more powerful figures.

Given the time constraints and the limited recent and locally specific literature, priority was given to data extracted from the interviews and collective sessions. The piece is therefore grounded in those experiences and perceptions. Our reflection also builds on the work and ideas of many who have discussed and shared knowledge and learnings on feminism in Lebanon, in writing or in conversation, whether formally or informally, though we may not be able to cite all of them in this report.

## Characterization of the feminist movement in Lebanon

### Setting the ground

As previously mentioned, we refer to feminism throughout this paper in its broadest sense as any personal, professional, or political intervention which aims to challenge gender injustice. As such, a feminist is anyone or any formal or informal organization who may or may not identify as such, but whose work, vision, and values fall under this umbrella. We also define a political movement as organized collective efforts for political and social change that involve: linkages between the different actors in the form of a shared political vision, a constituency base and mobilizing capacity. Stronger and more mature movements usually have a clear shared agenda, whereas nascent ones often share a broader vision. As such, adopting a movement building lens involves looking at the clarity of this shared agenda, the existence and nature of linkages between the different actors, and the strength of the constituency base and capacity to mobilize it.

Our analysis and reflections on the collected data are grounded in the belief that movement building is crucial for social change and that strengthening feminist collective action is at the heart of our fight for gender justice. This understanding that movements matter is echoed in previous studies and research<sup>4</sup> that have shown that feminist gains have been secured through building collective power, that sustained change has been achieved through movements rather than legislation and policy change alone, and that movements are the most effective way to making marginalized and stigmatized communities of women visible.

A clear majority of our interview participants asserted that a feminist movement does exist in Lebanon and unanimously identified the presence of a feminist community along which they are willing to organize. The perceived elements qualifying this movement can be categorized as follows:

- A legacy of feminist action and a current vibrant and diverse feminist scene, including continuous campaigning and advocacy for legal reforms, and a rich production of feminist knowledge in the form of online and offline content;
- the mainstreaming of a gender equality discourse that has reached homes and areas outside of Beirut as well as governmental bodies and mainstream political parties;
- the experienced manifestations of solidarity amongst some of the feminist actors and emerging forms of intersectional organizing;
- and a general sense of belonging to something bigger than individual groups and organizations.

These indicators will be further explored in the second section of the report as dynamics and trends that could nurture movement building. As such, the feminist movement in Lebanon is commonly understood as a collection of organizations, groups, and individuals with sustained efforts for social and political change. In view of the framework we presented above, this general understanding lacks clear elements that relate to a

shared agenda or clear collective vision, as well as a strong popular base with a capacity to mobilize. Those elements were not, however, absent from the conversations, and were addressed by many of the feminists we talked to, revealing a general sense of scepticism towards the ability of the feminist movement to grow stronger. They are reflected in a range of personal, contextual, and organizational challenges that will also be explored further in the second section. Despite this shared narrative, the readiness and desire to collectively work on devising solutions for these challenges was also apparent. We will elaborate more on this in the final section.

## **Typology of feminist actors in Lebanon**

Different attempts at classifying feminist action have emerged in the literature as well as in public discourse, which were reflected in the interviews conducted as part of this study. This section provides an overview of the typologies encountered in the literature and our interviews and concludes with a proposal for a more nuanced classification.

One of the main typologies discussed in the literature<sup>5</sup> is historical and refers to four waves of feminism. The history of feminism in Lebanon is read as a succession of four waves demarked into well-defined time periods. This classification links the shifts between waves to important political events of each period, including independence and nation-building, frustrations of the Arab world in the late 60s and the rise of a new left, the end of the Lebanese civil war and increased institutionalization through non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the rise of new leftist feminism. Such accounts of feminist history have been critiqued as being too limiting and reducing feminism to upper-class women's organizing or within self-identified feminist circles, and have been followed by work<sup>6</sup> that has sought to provide a "complex narrative assembled from histories of women's participation in various struggles across multiple time periods and in the present"<sup>7</sup>. Although we do not look at feminist action and organizing in Lebanon from a historical perspective in this paper, such historical readings and narratives of the movement provide relevant contributions to any analysis of its current state, and indeed support our own analysis. Noteworthy is the emergence of a feminist discourse, since the 2000s, which is defined as adopting a broader and more systemic approach than that of women's rights, tackling issues like heterosexism and racism, and adopting an intersectional discourse on the liberation of women.

Such radical discourse was first embodied by Nasawiya, a radical feminist collective in Lebanon that was born during the aforementioned fourth wave in 2009, and amassed hundreds of members. With the closure of Nasawiya in 2012, there was a clear shift from highly centralized and homogenous radical feminist organizing to a proliferation of smaller radical feminist groups whose memberships range from 5 to 45 members. While these groups may sometimes overlap in membership, their objectives vary and cover a range of issues.

Today, the most commonly used distinction found in activists' discourse classifies key feminist players into two categories; NGOs and unregistered groups. This distinction is sometimes accompanied by a distinction between women's rights defenders and

feminists, whereby the former often refers to employees of WROs and the latter to members of smaller or more informal collectives. Members of smaller or informal collectives critique the work of WROs on the grounds of it being un-feminist or apolitical, while WROs often attribute this to a false sense of ideological superiority on behalf of these smaller unregistered groups. The NGO/non-NGO dichotomy is sometimes made to emphasize differences in commitment between those that are referred to as “activists with a cause” as opposed to employees of WROs who work on projects.

This dichotomy stems from a common feminist critique of NGO-ization defined as a “shift away from experience-oriented movement politics toward goal- and intervention-oriented strategies.”<sup>8</sup> The professionalization of feminism, it is argued, has “enabled the depoliticization of social and women’s movements, their appropriation by donor-driven agendas, and a neoliberal co-optation of feminist practice.”<sup>9</sup> Feminist researchers have argued that the NGO-ization of women’s rights issues shifts the focus from challenging and questioning structural injustices and oppressions into project implementation and quick issue-based solutions.<sup>10</sup>

Although this critique is common among radical feminists in Lebanon, some of the people who critique this trend have themselves founded an NGO or expressed a desire to do so in the near future. This is because NGOs are seen to be the most effective means to secure funding and scale up a group’s work. Other important drivers for NGO-ization are the very limited employment opportunities in the country and the widely expressed challenge of maintaining one’s activism alongside a full-time job.

We do not mean to imply that this critique of NGO-ization is not valid but that it should be nuanced and adapted to our context in order to provide a more accurate understanding of the current state of the movement and facilitate better solutions to emerging challenges and tensions. We posit that it is a group’s ideology, reflected in their understanding and analysis of the problem and their end goal, and not their legal status or organizational structure, that better determines their role in the feminist movement.

A more useful typology from the lens of movement building is one that analyses feminist action based on tangible political differences, namely their proximity to or level of engagement with the state, their relationship to their constituencies, and their understanding and analysis of feminist issues. These categories should only be understood in relation to the criteria laid out in the table below. They are not presented as rigid, clear-cut categories, nor placed in comparison with each other. In fact, given the complexities of feminist realities and action, one typology cannot capture all their different dimensions and a level of simplification cannot be avoided.

<b>Category</b>	<b>State Actors</b>	<b>Reformist Actors</b>	<b>Radical Actors</b>
<b>Description</b>	Government institutions with exclusive gender focus	Mainly big WROs – with few exceptions	Small NGOs and unregistered groups
<b>Type of involvement</b>	Employment	Mainly employment, sometimes activism	Mainly activism, sometimes employment
<b>Focus</b>	Legal reform Gender mainstreaming	Legal reform Service Provision	Community organizing Alternative knowledge production
<b>Funding</b>	Government of Lebanon and international non-state donors	International state and non-state donors	International feminist funds, revenue-generating products and services
<b>Strengths</b>	State power	High visibility, high reach, mainstream discourse	Community organizing, Constituency are organizers
<b>Barriers to Movement Building</b>	State inherently at odds with movement building	Beneficiary-type relationship with their constituencies	Socioeconomic constraints, inaccessible discourse, limited reach

*Table 1. Proposed Typology of Feminisms in Lebanon*

### *State actors*

The explicit intervention of the state on gender issues is a recent phenomenon. Prior to 1998, there was no government entity specialized in women's issues. The Ministry of Social Affairs's (MoSA) department of women affairs was the only official department dedicated to women. Through the law 720/1998, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) was created to fill this gap but was given no executive power. In 2017, the government launched the new Office of the Minister of State for Women Affairs, now called the Ministry of State for Economic Empowerment of Women and Youth, which essentially grants a seat for women's affairs at the council of ministers. Both government bodies draw on the work and discourse of reformist organizations, and employ many of the same tools: media campaigns, advocacy for legal reform, and capacity-building for women. Though funded in part by the government, the NCLW also applies for funding from international donor agencies, thus competing with NGOs over limited funds.



Some WROs work in partnership with the NCLW, while others reject this form of state feminism and see it as a co-optation and depoliticization of feminist discourse by the state.

However, state feminism is not relevant to the movement building lens that we adopt in this paper, and is therefore not analysed further.

### *Reformist actors*

The years following the civil war have seen the institutionalization of feminism through WROs with two key domains of intervention: service provision and advocacy for legal reform. These WROs rely on international treaties, resolutions, and agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Declaration, to promote women's issues, empower them, and achieve gender equality. They are labelled by some feminists as well as by feminist scholars<sup>11</sup> as non-political service providers, and are centred around specific gender-related issues like sexual and gender based violence, right to citizenship, child marriage and more recently, women's participation in politics. They are characterized by hierarchical structures with a leadership that is often fixed and hard to challenge. Many of them have significant access to governmental and non-governmental funds. Their campaigns get high media visibility, making their discourse around gender issues the loudest in the country.

WROs are often lobbyists that engage with state institutions, government representatives, and parliamentarians as a means to achieving legal reform. They differ amongst themselves in relation to their willingness to engage with religious figures, as well as in their long-standing personal and professional disputes.

Reformist actors are not restricted to big registered NGOs as they also include some smaller registered and unregistered groups and campaigns.

### *Radical actors*

Radical feminists were identified as such by state and reformist feminists. This also coincides with their own perception of their work as more radical and intersectional than other groups. In the past, radical groups such as Nasawiya have succeeded in forming issue-based alliances with reformist organizations such as Kafa, and in integrating a more radical discourse around women's rights into these NGOs, although such alliances have been contested and critiqued<sup>12</sup>. Today, radical feminists organize themselves in smaller NGOs and unregistered groups and, despite the proliferation of these groups, their political red lines are aligned. They seek to transform all power relations in society and not just those that are gender-specific. As such, their political agendas cover a wide variety of issues. As expressed by one interviewee, *"it's irrelevant whether a group is an NGO or not, what's relevant is intersectionality versus focusing on single-issue organizing, and looking at the root causes of problems."*

Radical feminists clearly position themselves against the state and often against the reformist WROs as well. They critique reformist WROs on their single-issue organizing and



their lack of solidarity with refugees and migrant workers, their normalization of the state, and lack of intersectional discourse on racism, classism, sectarianism, homophobia, and transphobia. Though their work emphasizes the importance of building grassroots organizing and mobilizing power, their efforts have yet to materialize into a mass base or communities of organizers. They seek to create horizontal structures both internally and within their communities. Their funding is either obtained through feminist donor agencies or through revenue-generating products and services.

### *Individual actors*

It is also important to acknowledge the individual feminists who fall within the cracks of these groups and categories. These include people who express that they strive to uphold feminist values and practices in their everyday lives, as well as what Deema Kaedbey calls “shadow feminism” to describe the often-unacknowledged feminisms of “women in Lebanon who are not Lebanese, for example, such as refugees and migrant workers, as well as Lebanese women who do not identify as activists or feminists.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Points of contention**

The main distinction mentioned between reformist and radical actors lies in their position towards the state. Radical feminists and organizations, as opposed to reformist feminists, were generally against collaborating with any state institution, mainstream political party, or religious authorities, and consider them part of the patriarchal system they are fighting against. Interestingly, engaging with religious authorities was the most contested by people from both sides, with some reformist organizations expressing disapproval over engaging with such institutions.

*“When you’re working on advocacy for an issue in the Lebanese parliament, whether you like it or not, you can’t dismiss a political party that supports your cause because they are the ones who will lobby for the law. Does this mean that people who work on advocacy with the system or political parties like the system? No. But we believe that providing protection for girls is achieved through legal protection, which means that these people in the parliament have to vote on it. At the same time, we differ with other organizations that are working with religious authorities. We don’t engage with religious authorities.”*

Other actors saw these relationships as strategic and necessary, such as when working on custody rights and under-age marriage. Some activists expressed feeling overly critiqued for working with religious authorities, a strategic decision that they believe is needed, even though they agree with the discourse of radical feminists.

Other points of contention exist among groups and can sometimes cut across this typology of reformists and radicals. These include stances on abortion, child marriage, sexualities, sex work, and the “engaging men” approach.

Participants also challenged each other on the flexibility of their political discourse, where radical discourse was perceived to be too rigid and decontextualized. In fact, radical actors were critiqued for not taking into account the local culture, and for automatically

excluding potential allies or networks without taking the time to discuss and negotiate with them. On the other hand, radical groups and activists emphasized the importance of not compromising on their political values and red lines.

A detailed characterization of political differences among groups is presented below:

Political stance towards	Policies	Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The State</li> <li>•Religious authorities</li> <li>•Internal Security Forces</li> <li>•Mainstream Political Parties</li> <li>•National Commission for Lebanese Women</li> <li>•The Syrian Revolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Politicizing/depolicitizing feminist discourse</li> <li>•Approaches towards child marriage</li> <li>•Abortion</li> <li>•Sexuality and sexual rights/LGBT issues/queer issues</li> <li>•Gender diversity</li> <li>•Sex work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Engaging men</li> <li>•Organizational hierarchies vs. establishing horizontal structures</li> <li>•Intersectionality vs. focusing purely on legal rights of Lebanese women</li> <li>•Inclusivity in discourse (e.g. based on people's backgrounds and histories) vs. uncompromising discourse and position</li> </ul>

*Box 1: Contentious Issues Reported by Participants*

## Dynamics shaping feminist movement building

### Contextual and structural tensions

In 2018, Kvinna Till Kvinna published a report<sup>14</sup> that documents the harsh realities faced by women human rights defenders and feminist activists worldwide, characterized by their limited ability to receive international funding, an increase in restrictive policies on freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, as well as violent attacks, harassment and intimidation. This is true of Lebanon, where crackdowns on activists and censorship by the state have been widespread and growing. In a country where mainstream political discourse fosters racism and xenophobia, and where refugees and migrant workers are commonly accused of exacerbating socio-economic problems, shrinking civil society space is rapidly becoming the norm. Deportations of migrant domestic workers as a result of their activism<sup>15</sup>, or imposing curfews on Syrian refugees, thereby restricting their freedom of movement,<sup>16</sup> are only few examples of these measures. Religious authorities have also become more vocal around gender and sexuality issues, and through their close ties with authorities, have ordered events organized around related issues to be cancelled.

Corroborating the above, interviewees reported feeling a lack of safety and security and a consistent sense of precarity and economic insecurity. This reality poses a significant strain on activists' work and life, but also on the lives of women, non-conforming individuals, refugees, migrants, and other marginalized groups across the country. Lebanese participants mainly focused on economic insecurity as barriers to their

organizing, while non-Lebanese participants reported their legal status and physical safety as barriers to participation in the movement. The same security concerns were shared by some trans interviewees. The increasing violence and surveillance practiced by the State also impact trans activists' ability to be active and visible. As one participant stated:

*"It doesn't only affect my being active, it affects my ability to exist. I get scared when I see violence or fights on the street against trans\* women. It's almost going to develop into a phobia of walking on the street. When I read that trans\* women are being pulled over by the Police in Hamra or in specific buildings... Nothing protects me, so anything can be a threat. You feel like you are next. So, I don't have physical security, and it isolates me. I want to be thinking about how I can help the community but instead all I think about is me and my safety. I don't want anything else, I just want to be safe. It drains your energy and brings you back to focusing on basic needs. Visibility is also an issue. I can't go on the media or do an interview to talk about my rights."*

This reality hinders movement building and discourages certain communities from joining the struggle. In the words of Sara Abou Ghazal: *"We know we live in a structure that is patriarchal. When women are targeted, people tend to think they must have done something wrong. Usually they lose their reputation, which means losing sympathy. Other women become less inclined to do that kind of work. We lose a lot of our continuity because of this. It means it kills our movement!"*<sup>7</sup>

The wider political system commonly emerged as a challenge to organizing. The system is perceived to be highly corrupt but smart and easily adaptable to global agendas and demands for reform, with the ability to co-opt movements when needed. More marginalized people, such as those with irregular legal status, face additional pressure and challenges. As one respondent puts it, *"the biggest challenge we face is that we are not registered and we are Syrian so our centre can be closed any time"*. Those pressures also include restrictions on freedom of assembly and association that hinder groups' ability to register, thereby limiting their ability to carry out their work and to receive funding.

Moreover, the connections between burnout, exhaustion, and activism are all too many, as was reaffirmed by interviewees who experience this reality in their daily lives. The difficult and draining nature of the work indeed stems from, but is also exacerbated by, the very oppressive structures that feminists seek to abolish. Activists interviewed for this report recurrently raised the issues of time constraints, exhaustion, and low energy levels as weighing down on their ability to organize. This is particularly true of those who practice their feminist work in parallel with a full-time job or their studies. Time constraints were especially highlighted, as they limit activists' ability to commit time to meetings, and necessary but often lengthy and difficult discussions. Activists also report feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, or lack of self-confidence to lead on projects, as well as inconsistent energy levels, which makes it sometimes difficult for them to sustain their work and motivation.

*"It doesn't take a lot to notice that this year there really is a lot of exhaustion among all of us. You can tell everyone is depleted."*

### *A vibrant and diversified feminist movement – against all odds!*

Although a general sense of fatigue was salient, many respondents did emphasize on the value of being part of feminist networks and groups, which sometimes shield them from the violent realities of the "outside world" and act as spaces where collective care and solidarity can be practiced.

*"On a personal level, I think it's not easy to be a feminist in Lebanon, we're happy in our circles, we support each other, but when you get out of your bubble a little bit, you actually get to see how society is like, you feel like there's still a big need for the work we do."*

Despite a constraining social, economic, and political context, a multiplicity of feminist groups with diverse priorities and approaches have emerged and have repeatedly succeeded to integrate feminist perspectives in other movements as well. This can be witnessed within non-feminist organizations and political parties, where women and gender non-conforming committees are being formed. These efforts attest to feminists' ever-growing efforts and political motivation to extend their reach and sustain their work.

*"I honestly believe that the individual work we do as organizations, plus the collective work that we do, is something that is very annoying to the patriarchy. Everything that we're doing is challenging patriarchal institutions and ways of doing things. It doesn't mean that patriarchy will collapse tomorrow, but our conversations are part of their challenge... We're challenging patriarchal leadership... family laws and economic laws. I think we don't do ourselves justice in acknowledging all this collective work. I think all of it is going in the right direction in terms of challenging patriarchy."*

Additionally, the past few years have seen a rich production of feminist content and knowledge online and offline, in the form of academic publications, journalistic writing, artistic products, and documentation of oral histories. Activists from older generations of organizing have referred to the fearlessness and bravery of younger activists in making issues visible where they could not, and in mainstreaming feminist content into Lebanese popular culture. In fact, people who are just starting to identify as feminists have increased access to feminist discourse, through comedy shows, storytelling events, art performances, comics, and more. Finally, the existence of several spaces available for feminist discussions and events reinforces a sense of belonging to a wider movement.

## Resources and power

### *The current funding eco-system*

*“Everyone looks for funding, not for causes to stand for.”*

Women's rights and feminist organizations and groups are underfunded, and have been so for decades – a reality that feminist activists and women's rights groups in Lebanon know all too well. In parallel, funds that do exist are often inflexible, short-term, and reflect donor agendas which are more often than not distant from movement priorities. This comes despite efforts driven by organizations such as the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) since the early 2000s, as well as international women's funds such as the Global Fund for Women and FRIDA | Young Feminist Fund, to make the case for more and better funding for such groups, by providing evidence that feminist movements have been most effective in achieving social change, particularly around gender justice<sup>18</sup>.

In discussing challenges in accessing resources, most respondents - regardless of their political leanings - highlighted the fact that feminist organizations are often left out of agenda-setting and decision-making spaces. Given this context, debates are rampant between activists in Lebanon over which funding sources should or should not be accepted, with funding coming from governments and embassies being particularly contested by radical activists on political grounds.

Securing and sustaining funding is a challenge today for both reformist and radical organizations alike, a reality echoed in reports on the funding landscape for women's rights and feminist movement building in Lebanon<sup>19</sup>. In the face of such challenges, state and reformist feminists have chosen to accept development funds without questioning donors' agendas. Some interviewees argued that these funds do not seem to contradict, but rather coincide with the priorities of these organizations and their reformist interventions. These organizations, usually much bigger in funding and size than radical leaning groups, rely on resources from governments, private foundations, and International non-governmental organizations (INGOs), which are usually large grants, but accompanied by agendas, strict requirements, and political priorities of donors.

*“That's just how they view these issues, they're not just following the funding. They found the right funding for that type of work. This enlarges the split between the bigger NGOs and the smaller groups, and how they practice their politics.”*

On the other hand, smaller and more radical groups tend to reject funds from such donors on political and practical grounds. The challenges mentioned in interviews are consistent with feminist research critiquing such grants, which revolve around increased competition between groups, global donor agendas that are distant from movement priorities, lack of negotiation power with donors, a tendency for funding to go towards more institutionalized groups - often the same big organizations - and towards “successful” projects with quick impact as opposed to core funding or more flexible milestone-focused resources. This leaves little to no room for younger groups and innovative projects. For example, many participants critiqued a recent dominant

discourse on women's economic empowerment and their integration into the labour market, describing this "discovery" of women as important economic agents as problematic, viewed it as implying *"let's abuse everything we can about women, in the household, workplace, and wherever else we can"*, and highlighted a need to create an alternative feminist discourse on women and the economy.

As funding in this current landscape tends to go to the same organizations, these reformist groups gain power, financial resources, and the space to expand their networks with donors and other partners, while smaller groups struggle to sustain themselves and their work.

As reported by some interviewees, these bigger, more established organizations therefore monopolize funding, and become intermediaries between funders and smaller organizations. As such, those groups are placed in a position of power, gaining access to relevant task forces and working groups at the national, regional or international level. This also opens the door for collaborations with other organizations with similar approaches. Therefore, smaller and radical-leaning groups, who do not get access to such spaces, tend to be side-lined from decision-making and lose influencing power over donors and other partners. This recurrent absence from formal negotiation or agenda-setting spaces and working groups also translates into less collaboration and more fragmented work, and therefore lack of a comprehensive discourse and limited opportunities for collective action.

*"Big donors don't want to give to the small groups. They want to give a big bulk of money to a big NGO and this NGO then divides up this sum and gives some of it to the local community. So, then it becomes about how good your relationship is with the big NGOs. But these big NGOs built themselves in a way to have that capacity and to take that money. It's becoming common practice and it's very dangerous because as a big NGO, you can literally obliterate a whole branch of a movement."*

It is necessary to note that part of the challenge with the relationship to donors stems from within the movement itself, as local organizations play an important role in sustaining such dynamics with donors. Individual siloed attempts at securing access to resources, through gaining more visibility and larger credit, lead to increased competition, where *"we start working against each other rather than against patriarchy."* This limits the movement's collective power to make demands and challenge donor agendas.

Some relatively smaller NGOs have attempted to form collective fronts in situations where donor practices have had direct implications on their work, such as unjustified project cuts, without much success. Participants in this research called for discussions to organize around such issues and explore ways of taking a collective stand in the face of donors. Their interest extends to democratizing the funding scene by shifting power dynamics and addressing the fragmentation and lack of collaboration between groups without jeopardizing any of the work being done. The aim would be to unite and therefore gain negotiation power with donors, which would allow the groups to make demands before accepting funds.

### *Feminist donorship: opportunities and challenges*

As already mentioned, difficulties in securing financial resources pose a significant strain on radical organizations' sustainability and growth. Although these groups refuse certain funds on political grounds, they also have limited access to funding as a result of donors' focus on specific projects with immediate and measurable impact, rather than sustained feminist and collective action. Those groups also reject unequal power dynamics in the relationship between donors or funders and grantees, where the former is in full control of the latter's work and sustainability. Informal and unregistered groups also expressed that the visibility and credit expected by donors hinders them from accessing their funds. As expected, these groups are more likely to be funded by feminist donors, such as FRIDA, Global Fund for Women, and Mama Cash.

Contrary to others, feminist donors and funders are commended by actors in the movement for not imposing agendas, adopting priorities that are politically in line with their grantees, having participatory approaches rooted in building communities and movements, providing core and flexible funding, opening access to resources to younger groups and innovative projects, and having easy proposal writing and reporting mechanisms. Still, as reported in interviews, these benefits come with their respective challenges, the most important of which is that those grants are usually very small, and groups either end up with limited budgets for human resources, or are forced to resort to donors they are not in line with politically to sustain the organization and/or their activities. As one interviewee stated:

*"They're all small grants but put together, it's decent. It's enough for two salaries. Two of the donors increased their grants, one donor is new, we just got them in July, so we had to decide: do we increase the workload on two people and do more projects or do we hire a third person, rent an office, and keep the same workload? We went for option 1. So, we still don't have a third person, we don't have an office but we have more money for more projects, and that's obviously a challenge."*

While those efforts on the part of some donors are generally appreciated, in some case they still lead to tensions. Firstly, feminist donors focus on building partnerships and networks and consider the groups they fund their "partners" rather than "grantees". This poses a risk of unrecognized power dynamics that inadvertently exist in these relationships, and potentially opens the way for hidden power to be abused. Moreover, these donors usually have local feminists on their advisory boards, which is a great step forward in making decisions that are informed by local needs and perspectives, but can become problematic when these activists become "gatekeepers". The latter would mean that selected activists sometimes get the power to decide, officially or unofficially, on resource allocation and giving or withholding access to opportunities. Where this is not acknowledged, and treated carefully, it could allow for biases and histories to play a defining role in who gets access to resources, and creates new power imbalances within the movement itself. In addition, these donors are perceived to make assumptions about group dynamics without having a comprehensive understanding of the local context, which could create additional tensions between groups. For example,



participants highlighted the importance of treating grants for coalition building carefully, in order not to force local groups to forge alliances when they are not ready to, and instead fund those coalitions when they happen organically.

*“Whenever they try to create some sort of collaboration, they don't understand that they're forcing it as outsiders. They think that because they have a board that is representative of regions and issues, it legitimizes a lot of the work that they do. And I think a lot of it comes from misguided excitement to do things on a local or regional level.”*

In response to such challenges, radical groups and independent activists expressed wishes to be independent from donor agencies and to create alternative structures. However, this raises tensions between non-funded feminist activism and socioeconomic needs within the context of lack of public services. In fact, the services provided by some organizations are a necessity for the survival of those who benefit from them. Moreover, given the economic precarity and lack of job security in the country, a big number of activists depend on NGO employment to secure their livelihood. Some respondents also argued that funding a movement is harmful to the movement itself, and that activism should not be a job, though this idea is contested by the reality on the ground. Some participants suggested that it might be more efficient to shift the focus to smaller projects that do not require large amounts of funding and a complicated legal structure.

*“I feel like I wish I didn't have to work in an INGO, it chips away at your soul because you do wonder, is this relevant? what are you doing really? is it just a job? does this matter in any sort of way? [...] I can talk a lot about how it should be ideally, that activism shouldn't be a paid position, but realistically it doesn't stand. I think this is harmful for a movement, but it also creates jobs. So, I don't know what to tell you.”*

Finally, to avoid or challenge such dynamics, some groups explain having chosen alternative sources of funding and models of organizing. Nevertheless, grassroots spaces and groups that do rely on autonomous and sustainable funding models, such as open spaces and cooperatives, are the most challenged in terms of securing resources. They rely on membership fees, fundraising activities, space rentals, and in-kind donations to sustain their spaces. Their main challenge has been to keep their spaces self-sustainable, and most of their efforts have gone into securing financial resources rather than focusing on political activities. Additionally, there remains a challenge in finding a balance between relying on membership fees, while trying to remain inclusive of marginalized communities, such as migrant domestic workers. Moreover, as this model is not very common, there aren't enough groups relying on it to be able to support one another. While those groups struggle to create alternative models, they are criticized for indirectly resorting to donor money by renting out the space to other NGOs or being inaccessible to non-members.

### **Centralized organizing**

*“Our feminist movement, if it is not more popular, more grassroots, more embedded in society, then it is not a feminist movement that could bring women any privileges”.*



The centralization of feminist organizing is identified in the interviews as one of the major barriers to the effectiveness of the movement in Lebanon. In RootsLab's midline review as well as the pilot evaluation, partners spoke of that reality in different ways: *"I respect all struggles wherever they may be, but I know that this one [feminist struggle] wasn't able to reach our areas... Working in the villages is much more difficult. Our goal is to bring this to the villages."* In fact, the added value of RootsLab's collective journey and the interest many actors took in the program stems from its intention to widen the circles and improve access to feminist resources to those who are not usually at the centre of feminist or political action. In her speech during one of the program's events, Sara About Ghazal speaks of decentralization and building bridges as one of three key transitional lessons from the past ten years of feminist organizing:

*"We need to work on widening the movement and spreading it as an idea, a condition, or a basis of belonging to those who aren't working at its centre. This is exactly what RootsLab has done when it reached out to the regions outside Beirut and challenged a prerequisite that feminism can only be practiced in the main city. This has helped refute the idea that to practice feminism means that individuals and women must leave their communities and settle into new ones. In fact, RootsLab has confirmed that feminist initiatives can live in the places each and every one of us comes from. Building this bridge brings new experiences, and breaks the feminist movement out of a state of stagnation and unhealthy egocentrism."<sup>20</sup>*

The geographic centralization of the movement has been a key contested issue in the past years, particularly when it comes to engaging women from more marginalized areas. In fact, radical actors find expanding their geographic reach to be challenging due to logistical and ideological constraints. The latter refers to limited time and resources that would allow such efforts to emerge. The issue is also often attributed to language and class, where many activists in Beirut widely communicate in English, are generally highly educated, and are not very familiar with contexts outside of Beirut and its surroundings. Beyond logistical constraints, however, the absence of such efforts is sometimes attributed to radical actors' feminist politics that reject top-down approaches or imposing external discourses and practices.

Some reformist actors with larger funding find it relatively easier to expand their reach outside of the capital, by establishing centres that provide specific services in different areas, along with dedicated staff. Some of them have somehow relied on volunteer pools to widen their reach and impact. These NGOs provide women with services such as vocational training targeting both young and older women. However, such projects fail to tackle the structural and systemic violence and barriers faced by women on a daily basis. Moreover, unlike cooperatives and political parties, the NGO structure hinders movement building by limiting the relationship between the organization and its constituencies to service provision, turning women into beneficiaries of services rather than agents of change or organizers. These challenges imply that basic strategies such as covering transportation fees for women from villages to attend events and protests in Beirut are insufficient in bridging this gap.

So far, all of these groups lack deliberate and serious efforts to building bridges with women outside Beirut. In cases where such interactions do occur, as in the case of RootsLab, the dynamics are both positive and promising.

*“The Bekaa includes many of the marginalized areas in Lebanon. People in the Bekaa cannot be expected to go to Beirut... All those events that happen in Beirut, people simply can't attend them. It's so obvious. If the feminist movement really wants to become better than all the other political and social movements, it has to be more grassroots. Unfortunately, there is still a lot of elitism, not in the practice or attitude towards people, as no one behaves in an elitist way on a personal level, but in our strategies.”*

It is important to note that this centralization is representative of the larger political organizational structure in Lebanon, which makes it difficult for dissidence to happen in areas far from Beirut or bigger cities. It was not easy for some participants to imagine radical and alternative spaces, that have been created in Beirut in recent years, operating in marginalized areas, where there are larger structural constraints.

However, young women from villages reported a slight shift in social norms in their areas and a wider acceptance of gender justice work, which is reflected in the attendance of events they organize in their hometowns. They suggest that many spaces are open to holding events around feminism and women's rights, which they believe could help break the taboos around such issues. Participants who regularly organize political talks and discussions with women residing in villages have also found that reaching out to and organizing with both women and men is easier than expected, particularly among the youth, provided accessible discourse and language are used.

Although feminist organizing is often critiqued for being too centralized, there is a common acknowledgement of the women's rights discourse gaining traction and being adopted by state and non-state actors. The proliferation of NGOs and grassroots groups working on women's issues has increased visibility of and debates around women's rights in Lebanon through advertising campaigns, knowledge production, media appearances and coverage, and protests. This is more commonly the case with issues tackled by large WROs who are credited with bringing women's issues to the public sphere and taking this conversation from the capital to the regions: *“I don't think we can say anymore that the [feminist] movement is urban-centred [...] [Domestic violence] became an issue of public debate, a social issue, an issue that everybody was discussing, regardless of their position on it. [...] These are processes that are slow, that take a lot of time, but I like to think that they are irreversible. And to come to a stage where they will result in organizing, I think it's only a matter of time.”*

In fact, large WROs are perceived to have more power and visibility on this level due to their resources and campaigning approaches, that allow them to decide which issues are raised and receive attention at a national scale. Some people perceive them as representing the entirety of the feminist movement in Lebanon.

It is important to reflect that while many refer to the challenge of the reach of the movement in geographic terms, it clearly intersects with class, race and nationality. The

activism of those from poorer social classes and more marginalized areas, as well as that of non-citizens, is heavily constrained by additional structural barriers. It is indeed true that feminist activity is centralized in Beirut, but even within the city, the reach of the movement is questioned. Finally, challenging this reach as purely geographic poses the risk of erasing the agency, daily struggles, informal solidarity networks, and initiatives of women in the villages or in cities outside of Beirut, sometimes giving way to claims of false consciousness.

## **Intersectionality, solidarity and coalition building**

### *Practices of solidarity and intersectionality*

*"Our causes are diverse, our struggle is one."*<sup>21</sup> read the slogan of the International Women's Day (IWD) march organized in Beirut in 2016 by feminist groups, under the banner of solidarity for the struggles of women and non-conforming people everywhere. For the past three years, the annual IWD marches have brought increased visibility to the priorities and needs of more marginalized groups, notably migrant domestic workers, queer and trans people, and refugee women<sup>22</sup>. A banner by one of the organizing feminist collectives that reads *"Every struggle is a priority and solidarity is the solution"* became a recurrent theme and chant during these marches. Though the marches bear complex dynamics of their own, they mirror growing practices of inclusivity, intersectionality and solidarity in the feminist movement in Lebanon. In the words of Mira Bouchmouny,<sup>23</sup> *"The feminist movement in Lebanon is all-encompassing, all-encompassing of our pains and our struggles, creating the conditions to help us heal through solidarity, the conditions to help us win through solidarity."* Additionally, participants in the IWD marches in the past three years, especially migrant and refugee women, expressed feeling a great sense of solidarity from fellow feminists in Lebanon: *"That was the first time that we could raise slogans about Ghouta or anything related to Syria in a march in Lebanon."*

Interestingly, the word "solidarity" came up in eight interviews and the word "intersectionality" was explicitly used in seven other interviews. We view this as a direct result of the deliberate efforts made by radical feminist actors to practice their intersectional politics. One interviewee acknowledged a positive shift from single-issue organizing to intersectional organizing, bringing in a generational lens to the issue: *"It seems like the younger generation has a more intersectional approach and actively bridges gaps between movements like student rights, labour rights, migrant domestic workers' rights, queer rights, sex positivity, bodily autonomy... they frame it all under feminism."* Such intersectional organizing has indeed become more visible in recent years, and an example of that includes feminist actors organizing with leftist groups in the infamous *Hirak*<sup>24</sup> of 2015 under the banner of *"Patriarchy is Murderous"*, bringing a feminist lens to the demands against a corrupt and oppressive system.

### *Building coalitions and alliances*

Attempts at sustained coalition-building between feminist groups themselves have also characterized recent years, though their success is sometimes contested, and an overall

sense of defeat, exhaustion, or frustration was expressed by participants when discussing coalition-building.

Nevertheless, a prime example of this has been the formalization of a Feminist Bloc, through several discussions and alliance-building efforts by radical groups who, in 2017, came together to organize the yearly IWD march.

*“This year there’s some kind of depression among the refugees here. We’re all waiting to see what will happen to us. Every year is more difficult than the one before. But the Feminist Bloc makes me feel like we are not alone. We have a community. We have our people.”*

Recent experiences of alliance-building have brought up questions around inclusion. This was widely discussed by interviewees, who were split on the question of the bases for inclusion of feminist actors in such coalition-building initiatives. On the one hand, some respondents argued that political diversity ought to be celebrated, with those from reformist organizations asserting that a feminist coalition should include all groups, and arguing that the bigger enemy is the patriarchal system. On the other hand, radical actors reaffirmed their political red lines and wanted to challenge the reluctance of reformist groups to engage in intersectional work on issues related to sexuality and the rights of migrant and refugee women, and the lack of a political movement building approach to their work. Therefore, while all interviewees expressed the need for coalitions and solidarity networks, the basis for inclusion in such coalitions and networks differed widely.

### **Leadership and power sharing**

Questions around hierarchy and leadership came up quite often in the interviews, mostly in the context of discussing decision-making within and between organizations.

Manifestations of power imbalances are discussed in relation to both radical and reformist organizations. In the latter, clear hierarchies and leadership structures are in place and decision-making is often in the hands of the board and executive director. Employees of these organizations feel marginalized from decision-making processes, and the transfer of power is very limited as the same people could remain in leadership positions indefinitely. On the other hand, although radical organizations have more horizontal structures and grassroots foundations – sometimes without any appointed leadership – implicit leaders and unhealthy and abusive power dynamics often emerge, a phenomenon termed by feminist academics as “structureless hierarchy”<sup>25</sup> and referred to by one interviewee as the “tyranny of structurallessness.”

Power imbalances in both radical and reformist groups result from and are also the cause of unequal access to opportunities for personal and organizational growth. Such opportunities could be paid or unpaid and include, but are not limited to, invitations to attend national and international conferences, roundtables, or consultations; to speak on panels; to give or attend trainings; to join international and regional networks and alliances; and to be on the board of a donor or other international organization. These

opportunities are often centralized in select figures or organizations in the movement, which further concentrates exposure, experience, knowledge, and power among few individuals. Both local and international actors have a role to play in instilling such dynamics, and challenging them can be difficult when people fear losing friendships, networks, and resources granted through these networks.

In many cases these opportunities are given to activists who, amongst others, have indeed committed and invested a lot of their time and energy in the movement. However, despite the value placed by feminists on women and trans people taking up their rightful space, tensions inadvertently emerge as this space itself is already narrow. Challenging often invisible power imbalances and the concentration of resources and opportunities would then require creating a culture of deliberate skill, knowledge and opportunity sharing, especially with those who have less experience or face larger constraints.

### **Accountability**

Reflections on internal dynamics, behaviours, and ways-of-working, whether interpersonal or organizational, take up a lot of space in the feminist movement in Lebanon, in line with feminist values of reflection and accountability. While such practices of critical self-reflection are generally appreciated by activists, and are even a source of pride for some, others have expressed that an excessive attention to internal issues and the continuous calls for accountability can sometimes come at the expense of external efforts and stifle the progress of the movement towards the shared goal of social and gender justice. However, it has become clear over the years that unresolved tensions and lack of or incomplete accountability processes often hinder collaborations and collective action.

Feminist activists discuss the establishment of clear, practical and concrete accountability mechanisms within and amongst organizations, as a necessary step towards strengthening the movement. However, the moral ambiguity surrounding the term has made it difficult to establish satisfactory communal mechanisms. Although forms of accountability have been attempted in the past, they have often led to confusion and conflict. The perceived failure of these processes is considered on behalf of younger activists to have hindered a large part of the potential for intergenerational learning, and to have forced them to either start their experiences of organizing from scratch or inherit old conflicts that they might not be familiar with.

### **Ways forward and priorities for the feminist movement**

Reading the feminist scene in Lebanon from the lens of movement building allows us to strategize around approaches and interventions that could benefit the wider movement in the long run. While some challenges we face are related to structures beyond our immediate control, such as the political and economic context, others are very much within our reach. In fact, two characteristics of the movement have emerged as the most detrimental to its growth: the centralization of feminist activities in Beirut and within a

limited community of Lebanese women specifically, and the concentration of power and resources with few individuals and organizations.

Challenging these patterns requires continuous and deliberate efforts to move from the current model of organizing to one that promotes a culture of sharing skills, knowledge, and resources. All actors in the present eco-system, from individuals to local and international organizations and donors, have a role to play in driving this shift in perspective and in practice. The way forward involves work and investment in individuals as well as the collective.

### **Moving towards a people-centred approach**

Strengthening the feminist movement in Lebanon, and widening its reach, requires efforts to prioritize the diverse experiences, needs, and agency of individual women and trans\* people in organizing strategies. Rather than focusing solely on the issue at hand, which often entails approaching people as beneficiaries or volunteers, every feminist action and initiative needs to actively invest in individuals as organizers and facilitate their access to tools and resources that would support their organizing. In that sense, every feminist action would work towards two ends: that of the action itself and that of developing individual organizing capacities. One interviewee expressed a need for such an approach while discussing their experience of organizing the IWD march:

*“When experienced activists get burnt out and decide not to organize the march, they leave others with no guidance or lessons learnt from previous marches. The whole history and knowledge gets hidden... [this happens] because we’re not really looking at the march as an opportunity for the movement to spread learning within our members... If we were, then I think everyone would help organize the march.”*

### **Investing in inclusive spaces for debate amongst groups and activists**

Throughout our study, it was rather difficult for many of the activists we engaged with to imagine solutions and ways forward without engaging in political discussions with other feminist groups. Some also highlighted the need to build a collective vision rather than deciding on priorities in an individual manner. The collective learning sessions presenting initial findings from this exercise sparked some of these early discussions.

Based on that, a clear need to create inclusive spaces for debate and dialogue amongst organizations and activists emerged as a prerequisite to any future collaborative work. Healthy confrontations and challenging discussions on political values, tactics, and longer-term goals and strategies would allow feminist actors to impact each other's work, and constitute a first step towards scoping potential collaborations, building alliances and coalitions, and, eventually, a stronger movement.

*“To build a movement, we need to start meeting at least. I literally don’t meet with any feminists... I have no clue what they are working on. All the groups are closed off. The only thing they meet for is the IWD and [not everybody] is invited to that. So, we are definitely in need of meetings and of spaces where we can meet.”*

These meetings would cover issues relevant to both the movement and the broader political environment, and could take on different forms, such as regular convening or assemblies, feminist conferences, panel discussions, retreats, or structured debates... They would differ from the many existing events and meet-ups in that they would be inclusive by design, purposely accommodating all existing feminisms to facilitate substantial and constructive exchanges.

Organizing such discussions can, admittedly, be difficult; spaces for reflection, dialogue, and collective healing were considered crucial, yet the necessity for better communication mechanisms to facilitate such spaces was also addressed. Sustaining such collective efforts would also require considerable time and effort, but they are nonetheless essential for the growth of the movement and for building a shared political vision. Many interviewees stressed that the time is ripe for starting such a process, especially within the current context of a vibrant and diverse feminist scene.

*"If people don't understand the importance of this, of keeping each other updated, of working together outside the trauma of urgency, we will not be strong as a collective or network."*

### **Building meaningful and strong alliances**

These conversations present an opportunity for groups to understand and negotiate different politics, and will therefore allow them to establish grounds for a shared political vision upon which strong, substantive, and meaningful alliances can be built. Though this is challenging, given the differences amongst various actors in values, tactics, and approaches, it remains an essential process.

This can be contrasted with recent attempts to build alliances before discussing a common vision. For example, the Feminist Bloc was a manifestation of a desire for collective action and to build connections between organizations. Its creation, however, preceded crucial conversations around the politics and vision of each group or the purpose of such an alliance.

*"Ultimately, this has to be it – a diverse intersectional feminist movement, where you can have clusters within it working on specific themes or sub-themes. We're all part of this, we are in one cluster or the other. I think the question is how do we bring all these clusters together?"*

Alliance-building across movements with intersecting priorities is also encouraged, particularly concerning organizations working on environmental and economic justice. Such alliances could in fact be formed around issues where not enough efforts are made to integrate a feminist discourse, such as waste management, housing, and labour issues, and could help develop a vision for the future that involves more mature proposals for social, political, and economic change.

The way forward for the feminist movement is through deliberate investment in every one of us as an organizer in her own right, and the creation of inclusive spaces where all

feminists meet to debate, learn from each other, and plan together for the future of the movement.



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<sup>3</sup> Local organizations that hosted the initiatives including, the Knowledge Workshop, Anti-Racism Movement, KAFA, Women Now, Fe-male, Qorras and Shift, as well as many allies and resource individuals from the movement and beyond who acted as mentors, trainers and facilitators.

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<sup>24</sup> A popular movement that emerged in Beirut in 2015 as a reaction to the waste crisis in Lebanon.

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