**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven a cataclysmic event in much of the globe. As nations scrambled to contain the public health crisis and manage its repercussions on the economy, research emerged documenting and analyzing the more subtle consequences the pandemic would have on numerous groups. Feminist activists worldwide pointed to the plight of already marginalized demographics in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, critiqued governments’ inaction on several such fronts, and suggested alternative policies. Many specific difficulties and vulnerabilities to the medical, economic, and social ramifications of COVID-19 remain unaddressed by states even as they have taken comprehensive measures to support the health and economic sectors. As such, we have witnessed many different actors rally around such gaps, a prominent one of which concerns women.

Patriarchy has already put women in position of vulnerability prior to this global pandemic, but the repercussions of emergency responses such as the intensification of essential and care work, lockdowns, economic slowdowns, and health measures have proven especially consequential on them. Women have been shown to be especially sensitive to dramatic changes in policy and economic downturns, and the COVID-19 crisis has been no exception (Holmes et al. 2020, Matthewman and Huppatz 2020). For this reason, international organizations and some states have attempted to tailor their responses while taking into account these gender discrepancies and thus craft policies that support women according to their specific needs. The approach, methods and effectiveness of these measures have varied, and the extent to which these actors have engaged with other agents that are vocal about the need for such intervention is also diverse.

Analysts have noted that MENA states initially managed to contain the rate of contagion quite decently. But observers have also commented that the region is likely to suffer major economic repercussions that will possibly drive a sizable portion of the population into poverty (OECD 2020, Wong 2020). The stimulus packages and safety nets offered by the governments of the Middle East have been judged insufficient to absorb the shock of the COVID-19 crisis on their respective populations. Moreover, few have taken into account gender in their preparations of a response plan. As such, given the already precarious situation of women in the region and state inaction, MENA women stand to lose much in what was already a vulnerable social position.

In Tunisia and Lebanon, albeit for very different reasons, the COVID-19 pandemic added itself on top of an already volatile and unstable environment. Tunisia had just passed through fiercely contested elections and was amidst a changing and uncertain political climate, while Lebanon had been witnessing popular uprisings and a devastating economic and financial collapse. As the two states scrambled to take appropriate measures to curb the impending health crisis, it saw itself critiqued by civil society groups and feminists for its inaction and omitting of support for women. Their engagement with these groups was however dissimilar, concurrent with the different types of relation between women’s organizations and the state existing prior to the pandemic and resulting from long historical and political processes.

This report will examine the different policy responses of the Tunisian and Lebanese state in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, with regards to women’s specific needs and vulnerabilities. It will also analyze the role that feminist organizations and movements played in these proceedings, assessing it with response to the pre-existing position such groups had in their respective countries, and their respective approaches, ideologies, and activities.

**Conceptual Approach**

This report is committed to a feminist approach to mobilization and governance. In a critical moment such as the one the world is currently going through, it is of utmost importance to highlight the role women play in the daily functioning of the global economy. Women do critical work both in and out of the home, the implications of which will be discussed below. We also understand that this significant contribution of women to their economies is overshadowed by the injustices that accompany this work, from abuse to devaluation and invisibilization that renders this work “non-work”, be it paid or unpaid. Care work is one such type of labor which is often devalued and naturalized as a women’s duty, without however being recognized as labor.

Care work consists, broadly, of activities involving the care and maintenance of both people and objects, often within the ‘domestic sphere’. Care work is seen as women’s work, according to traditional and patriarchal divisions of labor which relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public one. Such views hold that women are to take care of domestic affairs for no pay; rearing children, household upkeep, and cooking. Men, on the other hand, work outside the home for a wage and provide financially for the household. Patriarchy renders women’s work invisible, and as such is responsible for the neglect and devaluation of care work, as well as the precarity of women’s work in the informal sector, the largest employer of women worldwide (Bonnet, Vanek and Chen 2019).

The informal sector is often notoriously insecure and conducive to exploitation and violence, whether in the form of wage theft or harassment. The sector moreover remains poorly understood, especially in the MENA region, given the difficulty of collecting data within it. Yet, being a large employer of women, its neglect in formal statistics thus obscures the real work conditions of women and thus renders the needs and demands of women in the informal economy invisible. Such patriarchal ideologies have unfortunately made themselves clear in the production of knowledge on economic systems around the world, with women’s status and contribution being measured solely through formal female labor force participation rates and led to a scarcity of gender-disaggregated data collection when it comes to employment, labor, care work, and so on. With that said, a focus on women must not obscure dynamics that pertain to other social identifications and positions, such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, nationality and others. As such, especially within the context of this pandemic, some women may find themselves in even more vulnerable situations according to the above characteristics. In sum, the report prioritizes all forms of women’s work as something needing a process of inclusion, valorization and representation and is committed to that end.

A large volume of literature has emerged during this pandemic highlighting the vulnerability of women to the economic, social, and political repercussion of the COVID-19 crisis (Bolis et al. 2020, De Paz 2020, Del Boca et al. 2020, Holmes et al. 2020, Hidrobo et al. 2020, Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020). These works and studies are often conducted or commissioned by international agencies such as the World Bank or Oxfam, and while they have begun to incorporate elements of the approach delineated above – such as recognition of women’s invisible care burden and their overrepresentation in the informal sector – they have yet to acknowledge women’s mobilization and organization and its role in the pushing for action and gender response, apart from the odd charitable initiative. This resonates with the historically overlooked character of feminist movements in the MENA region, while orientalist depiction of MENA female passivity and victimization prevail. This report departs from such representations by recognizing women’s agency, emphasizing that they are not passively enduring these conditions but rather are active agents in mobilizing and demanding their rights, and although they face challenges along the way, MENA women find creative ways to subvert and confront these obstacles. To this effect, this report recognizes the efforts that MENA women have made throughout history in order to earn their rights and dignity, and their long struggles and contributions to that end. This report also deploys a critical lens towards these efforts, understanding the internal divisions and debates within these movements and the different factions that exist within the struggle for women’s empowerment. As such, the “feminist movement” does not appear here as a coherent and homogeneous mass but rather as a diversity of organizations, structures, approaches, activities, and ideologies, whose relations to each other is varied and complex.

This paper is based on desk research and literature reviews and is complemented by interviews with various feminists studying the issue at the local level. Research was conducted on the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic and its gendered effects worldwide, as well as its consequences in the MENA region, and Tunisia and Lebanon more particularly. A review was conducted on the specific measures the two countries have taken in response to the pandemic and its economic ramifications, as well as their gendered considerations (or lack thereof). Moreover, a historical review was conducted on the history of women’s and feminist movements in these two countries as well the landscape of women’s mobilization today, including in their actions in facing this pandemic and their engagement with the state to this end.

**Women in the Pandemic**

A global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic has a range of massive effects outside of the medical ones, such as economic, social, and political ones. As gender experts, scholars and feminists were quick to point out, these are specific and particularly acute when it comes to women. Based both on lessons learned from previous epidemics such as Ebola and HIV, as well as preliminary observations from the COVID pandemic, feminists have been able to delineate the gendered dimensions of this novel public health crisis. The following is an attempt to sketch out the complexity of the pandemic’s consequences on women, with special attention to those features that are of relevant to economies and societies of the Global South.

*Employment and Poverty*

The globalization of supply chains has seen factories and agricultural production move to the Global South, where women became their ideal laborers. This “proletarianization of women, as the increasing concentration of women in lower-paid jobs in developing countries has been called, was accompanied by certain discourses that sought to naturalize this situation. Gender ideologies portray women as docile, subservient, and thus more suitable for the assembly line or the fields. Since their labor is perceived as complementary to the husband’s, they therefore get paid a lower wage, and employers thus face lower costs by employing them (Collins 1990, Mills 2003). Tendencies of pauperization and insecurity of work are increasing, and since women are concentrated in these two sectors that are highly volatile at the moment, the threat of unemployment is all the more serious. Teleworking, moreover, while being limited to more affluent households is also rarely feasible in industries where women are concentrated (except for education, though it is complicated even in that field), increasing women’s risk of losing their jobs, or, alternatively, putting them in a danger of infection by working regardless of lockdown regulations. Women, moreover, concentrate in professions where contact with others is frequent (unlike jobs in construction or natural resources, industries dominated by men and where contact with others is sparser) (Pangborn and Rea 2020) . But the proletarianization of women has also been accompanied by the informalization of their labor. The contraction of the public sector around the same period, largely due to structural adjustment policies and neoliberalization, pushed many women out of this more secure and stable sector into the informal workforce.

As mentioned previously, women make up a large part of informal workers, especially in agricultural sectors. Such labor and its forms are not normally captured by statistics nor considered in policy design, and therefore the conditions and demands of women in the informal economy remain invisible. Women in the formal economy tend to earn less than men for the same job due to pervasive patriarchal ideas that consider them as “secondary earner”, but within the informal economy such wage gaps are even larger due to the absence of regulation and accountability. The precarity of informal work is clearly on the rise during the pandemic, as workers with no rights or formal protection may be asked to work in risky conditions and defying lockdown policies, they may be coerced into working longer hours and their wages may be stolen under the pretext of the employer’s financial difficulties and the economic downturn. Moreover, informal workers, by virtue of not being registered as employed with the state, may not be entitled to state-insured indemnity or social assistance in case of loss of income or jobs. For particularly vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households and senior women which are most likely to be impoverished, such sources of emergency income may be critical in times like these.

*Essential Workers*

Despite lockdown measures becoming a popular tool in government response to COVID-19, a sizable amount of the laboring population labelled “essential workers” must still present themselves to work due to their occupations being considered indispensable in this time. Such professions predictably include those in the healthcare sector, but also those in agriculture, certain services, transport, and so on. Women make up a significant proportion of these essential workers. First of all, women represent a large part of the caring sector, be it as nurses, social workers, custodial services, and so on. For this reason, women have been described as being on the front lines of this pandemic, despite the typical heroes lauded by governments and citizens alike typically takes the form of the male physician. This bias is also apparent in the fact that despite constituting an overwhelming majority in the health sector, women essential workers are allocated far less protective gear and equipment than their male counterparts (De Paz 2020). As such, women are doubly exposed to infection and all of its repercussions, including social stigma and alienation.

In addition to these consequences, women, who usually occupy the lower echelons of the health sector hierarchy, are vulnerable to exploitation under the pretext of the state of emergency. Women around the world have in accordance reported working additional hours for little to no pay and being asked to make additional sacrifices to combat the pandemic that are not matched by their male counterparts. This is especially felt by informal laborers working in medical centers such as assistants, custodial workers, and so on, who do not have access to any social protection system. The contracting of such workers also increases in times of crisis under the same justifications, many of whom, as mentioned previously, are likely to be women. Given the prominence of women in this sector, it is all the more flagrant that there is a serious discrepancy between this overrepresentation and the dearth of women in decision-making positions. Women are rarely in leadership, administration or executive boards pertaining to the health sector. This includes positions in syndicates or trade unions, hospital administration and management, as well as governmental posts such as in health ministries or COVID response committees and task forces. This means that women have less of a say in the measures and policies implemented in order to tackle the pandemic and its ramifications and thus that women’s needs and challenges – if we take for granted that the women in leadership positions are indeed committed to gender-sensitive policy making and development, an issue that will be further explored below – are not taken into account in these responses.

*Care Work*

Women’s care work burden has also increased in these times of crisis. As mentioned previously, care work is a gendered issue as it is often seen as women’s work, according to traditional and patriarchal divisions of labor which relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public one. Such views hold that women are to take care of domestic affairs for no pay; rearing children, caring for the elderly, keeping up the household, and cooking. Men, on the other hand, work outside the home for a wage and provide financially for the household. Some of these perceptions persist even when this work is commodified such as with paid domestic work and nursing, which are still overwhelmingly considered women’s work. Where few social services are available and patriarchal gender norms prevail, the burden of care work that falls on women is ever more important for the functioning of the economy. In the absence of assistance with childcare and adequate retirement plans, these tasks will most likely fall on women, even when financial pressure drives them to take on paid work as well. The devaluation of this labor means that it is often not considered as such, and thus neither granted compensation nor recognized as a time consuming and straining effort, while still being considered an indispensable priority. “Women’s work” is thus seen as a lesser activity which does not equal other forms of paid work and is naturalized as an innate or biological proclivity of women. Such discourses often lead to statements that argue that this type of work should not be “corrupted” by the struggle for recognition and compensation.

As public health measures call for quarantine and self-isolation, women who have the privilege of working from home are still expected to take on care work on top of homeschooling their children or taking care of the house and making meals for the occupants now permanently at home. Childcare services or nurseries become considered inessential by governments, the latter considering that the care work of women is infinitely elastic and incurs no cost, which is not the case. Usual support systems and networks of care, such as neighborhood friends and extended families, are also lost in this situation due to social distancing guidelines. Studies have shown that despite certain optimistic declarations having been made about men possibly taking on more care work duties due to its supposed increased visibility at this time, no such shift in gender roles has occurred (Alon et al. 2020, Blundell 2020, Collins et al. 2020, Del Boca 2020). As women, due to better immune systems, are touted as having better resistance to the virus, they may find themselves having to take charge of additional responsibilities such as shopping for groceries and medicines. Immunosuppressed people and the elderly, who are at most risk from COVID-19, often also become their responsibility. This is complicated by some employers who minimum disruption to their operations calling the quarantine and public health crisis an “opportunity”, without taking into account that working spaces and facilities are essential for many to go about their work effectively, as well as how times of crisis put a strain on the flow of everyday life. This can also have serious consequences on young girls, who may be forced to drop-out of education in order to perform care duties or, alternatively, work due to greater financial pressures. This increased but unacknowledged care work burden hurts job prospects, especially for young women who face high levels of unemployment due to lack of demand for their labor, at least within the formal market. Such disruptions are unlikely to be fully understood, as time-use data on care work is scarce due to patriarchal ideologies erasing the value and importance of this labor prevailing even in research design.

*Gender-Based Violence and Health*

For women who face domestic abuse, quarantine is likely to worsen the situation, as women in lockdown are forced inside with their abuser. Financial difficulties and stresses are likely to be all the more acute given the ongoing economic downturn resulting from halting and slowing down of operations in many industries and sectors, and as such these emotional troubles are likely to be felt by women given patriarchal norms that do not enable men to let out frustrations in healthy ways and rather condone violence against women as a natural outlet of male anger. With that said, access to resources and networks of support during this time has become increasingly difficult, as reaching out to family and friends may be impossible due to social distancing regulations, and shelters or violence hotlines may be inactive or operating with reduced capacity due to governments declaring them “non-essential” services. As such, while cases of violence against women have seen an increase since the breakout of the COVID pandemic, reports and denunciations have decreased (Gausman and Langer 2020, Bettinger-Lopez and Bro 2020). It must be noted that being in the constant presence of the abuser is a further deterrent to reporting abusers or lodging a formal complaint against them, in fears of triggering further violence in the absence of a shelter or support system.

Yet support for victims of abuse and violence is not the only service that is in jeopardy during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. While many health services have been limited under the guise of being non-urgent at the time, those pertaining to women’s health, particularly sexual and reproductive health, have been assigned the lowest priority. Due to patriarchal attitudes that fail to acknowledge the importance of such provisions for women’s health and well-being, resources such as obstetrical care and provision of sanitary pads and contraception have been cut off at the moment. Women worldwide have reported difficulty accessing them, which puts them at risk of many illnesses and complications from existing conditions.

**Voicing Gendered Concerns**

States worldwide have proven unwilling to make space for gender-sensitive concerns in their COVID-19 response, despite the myriad challenges outlined above that women in particular face. It is thus important to turn our attention to those mobilizing in order to make these issues heard and discussed, notably feminist groups and civil society organizations. While the topic of women’s challenges during the pandemic has garnered the attention of international agencies the as the World Bank, Oxfam, UN Women and others, these have not sufficiently highlighted the role of local women’s groups in pressuring governments to act and to provide services themselves in the absence of state policy. As such, this section will examine the types of ideologies and activities guiding these civil society led efforts and the ways in which an organization’s relation to the state affects their reach and effectiveness. It will take into account the landscape of women’s mobilization in the Middle East particularly, observing the different histories and structure of women’s groups there.

One of the largest and most baffling oversights in the vast literature on women’s status in the Middle East is the neglect of the unyielding and valiant efforts of the various feminist movements in the region. While some attention has been paid recently to women’s organizations and activism in the context of the Arab Uprisings, women’s participation in social movements long precedes the 2010s. Women have been active in demanding rights and justice in various forms since at least the 19th century during public debates on independence and nationalism. Since then, women and their political associations have been involved in a variety of historical mobilizations such as labor strikes and anti-authoritarian revolutions throughout the region. It is thus a great error if any work purporting to support the betterment of women’s position in society fails to recognize the efforts of feminist movements and their part in furthering women’s rights in their respective countries (Al-Ali 2012; 2013). Efforts to improve women’s condition in the job market must as such seek to support feminist movements as they publicly express women’s demands, ambitions, and the challenges they face in everyday life.

With that said, it is important not to lump all different sorts of women’s activism into the same category. Rather, feminist have shown a remarkable diversity in the Middle East, as they do worldwide, and their approach, activities, and ideologies have been numerous. This has also meant that they face particular obstacles according to these specificities. Generally, most feminist movements have rallied around issues surrounding development, such as education, work, family laws, and political participation, with some tackling issues of economic justice specifically. Other topics such as violence against women and reproductive rights have also emerged relatively recently, though movements rarely limit themselves to a single issue and rather mobilize around a variety of interrelated topics in demanding for women’s rights and gender equality. However, as mentioned above, the approach and ideological bend varies, as there are positions ranging from Islamic feminist groups stressing gender equality’s consistency with and emergence from scripture to liberal organizations advocating for market and rights-based intervention and Marxist and communist movements stressing class, gender and capitalism as a specific locus of attention. Their activities range from lobbying to charity including such initiatives as providing shelters and aid (Joseph 1996; Al-Ali 2013). This plurality, as will be shown later in the report, has allowed for the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and other crises to be tackled in a variety of ways by feminist groups.

Women’s movements in the Middle East and North Africa face various challenges that are specific to the historical and political developments of the region. They are generally met with suspicion by different political agents and publics. This is due to many factors; first, the Arab nationalist regimes that prevailed during the mid-20th century sponsored many women’s groups in their vision for modernizing their nations. As such, certain feminist organizations or issues concerning women’s rights became synonymous with these governments that fell out of favor in the eyes of many. Moreover, the authoritarian and liberalizing regimes that succeeded them also instrumentalized women’s charitable organizations in order to further consolidate their power and present a friendlier face. With that said, it is important to note that groups advocating for women’s rights hardly have a good relationship with the state; to the contrary, some activists and their organizations find themselves heavily censored and sidelined when they operate within the state’s formal regulation and recognition, or otherwise seek to circumvent this form of official surveillance by registering as other forms of charities or centers, or, alternatively, working covertly.

The rising tide of Islamism’s position on this state-sponsored feminism reflects these developments, as it rejects it on the basis of being “inauthentic” and a “Western imposition” that seeks to displace true Islamic and cultural values. These Islamist movements, which have proved skilled at organizing, mobilizing and gaining political power, have emerged in the context of disillusionment with the poverty, unemployment and exploitation that the previous liberalizing regimes ushered in. They rose in prominence by providing a viable and coherent alternative to what they deemed a decline in civilization due to an estrangement from a certain “authentic moral order” (Dahlgren 2007; Moghadam 1993). Women hold a central position in this discourse, and this rhetorical “cultural authenticity” sees them playing their part in a patriarchal division of labor, and thus being caregivers without access to the public sphere. Although many Muslim feminists debate these movements’ interpretations of the role of women in Islamic thought, women’s groups have still had to contend with these accusations of inauthenticity and had to suffer limitations on their activities and cutbacks to their progress in the countries where conservative groups have secured a place in government. As such, there have been reversals in the advancement of women’s rights, including with regards to personal status laws, physical and sexual abuse, and others, which have complicated feminist progress, especially in times of crisis. Moreover, as women are expected to be caregivers and homemakers in these ideologies, the many women who do work outside the household, be it out of need or other reasons, find themselves in the absence of legal protection in case of abuse or exploitation, which becomes all the more relevant in the context of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven many such organizations to act quickly in order to mobilize and provide services during what has a proven a difficult time for many women. The means they have taken to tackle the challenges faced by women during the crisis are as diverse as their organization outlined above and can vary from political advocacy to in-kind aid distribution, phone services for medical aid, and others. The next section will explore the dynamics between these activities and organizations’ position vis-à-vis state and society, as well as governments’ responses to the COVID pandemic, looking at Tunisia and Lebanon in particular.

**Tunisia**

*Economic changes in Tunisia*

In order to best understand the position of women in Tunisia, and consequently the challenges they face during the times of the pandemic, it is necessary to scope out the state of the political economy of Tunisia and thus the economic and social roles women play to begin with. Tunisia is a largely service economy with a still sizeable agricultural and industrial sector, which represent an important percentage of exports, and an important though volatile tourism industry. Despite this, Tunisia is a net food importer and the vast majority of foodstuff for basic survival must be brought in from abroad. The manufacturing sector is dominated by the production of low value-added goods such as textiles. The country produces a small amount of petroleum, which mostly serves local demand. Tunisia also accumulates a major amount of its revenue from the remittances of its citizens abroad, especially those in Western Europe and the Gulf (World Bank 2018-2019).

As a result of regular debt crises through the second half of the twentieth century, the Tunisian government implemented various structural adjustment plans led by the World Bank and its partners over the next decades, which essentially privatized many state-owned enterprises in the agricultural and industrial sectors. This process of privatization and structural adjustment galvanized further in the 2000s, while still under the auspices of the Ben Ali regime. Another key reform consisted in the deregulation of labor market, and the passing of laws which lowered wages, facilitated hiring and firing, and targeted severance pay and payroll tax. As such, informal labor grew as work conditions worsened. Special economic zones and qualifying industrial zones were one such example where labor and environmental laws were laxed and other fiscal policies adjusted in order to attract foreign firms. The textiles and garments industry, which was a critical component of Tunisia’s economy and workforce, was massively transformed by those reforms. The sector faced colossal declines in wages and working conditions, as well as in ownership patterns. As cheap imported clothing became readily available, domestic companies found themselves unable to compete and were driven out of the market. Moreover, the termination Multi Fiber Agreement also placed pressure on Tunisian producers as global competition intensified due to China’s entry into US and EU markets. This would result in substantial job losses and the growth of unemployment. Combined with the rollback of government expenditure on social spending for services and commodity subsidies, as well as the substitution of progressive income and corporate taxes for value-added tax, would severely impact the poorest (Hanieh 2013).

Agricultural land reform also took a central place in this project, as much of the arable land that was still held under communal or collective forms of ownership were privatized, which facilitated the concentration and centralization of landownership among a few wealthy and notable families. These already had strong connections to the state, the Ben Ali regime and urban centers and had amassed wealth from this privileged position through the construction, tourism, and transport industries. This advantaged transferred into credits put towards acquiring the latest irrigation technologies, at the expense of small farmers and landholders. As such, landlessness and rural unemployment saw a meteoric rise. This increased linkage with the world market made global food price fluctuations all the more consequential to the livelihoods of poorer rural and urban dwellers across its territory. Rural life in particular was drastically affected, something seen in the concerning levels of child malnutrition, close to one third of all children in rural areas, and low access to safe water and sanitation (ibid). The gap in poverty between urban and rural dwellers has also increased over time (World Bank 2020).

These national transformations also resulted in food being cultivated for exports, and as such a growth in agribusiness spearheaded by the wealthy landowning families mentioned above. The crops became dominated by products with low value-added processing and began to concentrate a handful of goods (olive oil and dates among others), making farmers extremely dependent on the fluctuations of a single crop. The growth in exports did not contribute to the raising of farmers’ fortunes and standards of living, but rather the opposite. The majority of farmers remain working on small and marginal rain-fed farms, and those who do labor on crops destined for exports do not reap the profits made by the handful of large companies who own individual farms, marketing, and export routes. This system moreover prioritizes agriculture for export at the expense of satisfying domestic demand, as seen by the large amounts of imports. Foreign firms, often European, have also made their mark in agribusiness, enabled by the long-term leases afforded by the Tunisian state on desert land and partnerships with local ventures and holdings (ibid).

The importance of reviewing these historical political and economic transformations is to highlight that these changes have been highly gendered: the workforce in these factories and fields has largely comprised women, especially when it comes to informal work. Women are overrepresented in such positions due to them being perceived as cheaper labor, mostly as a result of patriarchal ideologies which consider them a secondary earner that can be paid less. As such, capital searching for cheap labor is more likely to contract them in order to keep costs low. It was for this precise reason that the World Bank specifically recommended that the government in Tunisia tap into the large labor pool of underemployed rural women for the textile industry (ibid). The rate of women in this sector rose accordingly, most of whom worked temporarily Moreover, disciplinary methods in factories and fields are conducive to a more obedient and marginalized workforce. These take the form of lack of security and safety for workers, sexual harassment, violence and abuse, as well as other exploitative practices such as wage theft and overwork. These conditions and more have been reported across Tunisian factories and farms and have been the subject of much pressure on behalf of trade unions and feminist groups.

*Feminist Movements in Tunisia*

In order to understand women’s groups reactions to such economic changes as well as to the intensification of pressures in the time of the pandemic, it is important to first review the type of relationship that women’s movements have had with the state. Women’s organizations have had a long history in Tunisia, as they have in the Middle East more broadly. The first such collectives did not necessarily have any interest in advocating for gender justice or equality but were often religious organizations offering material and in-kind support for women, or, otherwise instruction in proper behavior and conduct for modern womanhood. At the same time, many other organizations sprung up during the colonial period which specifically took up the nationalist cause and fought for women’s emancipated position within this newly imagined Tunisian state (Arfaoui 2007).

A major milestone of this movement came with independence and the subsequent announcement of the Code of Personal Status in 1956 by Habib Bourguiba, which afforded women many rights still absent in the wider Middle East region to this day, including access to abortion, nationality passing, and others. Bourguiba also promoted the institutionalization of many already-existing women’s groups, especially the formerly nationalist ones such as the National Union of Tunisian Women, which became the flagship institution for women’s affairs of the Tunisian state. With that said, this state feminism ran into the challenges outlined above: it became closely associated with state interests above all. The National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) was critiqued for exactly that reason, and for its inability to defend women’s interests and the shortages in the Personal Status Codes, such as the inheritance law. In reaction to such deficiencies, other feminist groups would soon proliferate throughout the 70s, albeit covertly, in order to mobilize around such issues. The 1987 ascent to power of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali through a coup d’état also saw further institutionalization of feminist organizations. The new president decided to pursue his predecessor’s policy towards women’s issues through, among others, the official recognition of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD), two prominent organizations that work on advocacy, research, as well as direct action through the provision of services and immediate aid.

Such recognition gave the two organizations significant visibility and outreach but came at the expense of their freedom of expression under this increasingly authoritarian and centralized regime, though they were not held to be as synonymous with state power as was their predecessor, the UNFT. The Ben Ali regime also created further institutions within the state, such as CREDIF and MAFFEPA. These agencies are responsible for developing gender research as well as providing certain types of aid and services to women in need. This period was also marked by the rise in Islamist movements and organizations which voiced strong opposition to many of the policies and stances advocated by feminist groups, as well as to the Code of Personal Status. The state maintained an ambiguous stance with these factions, often ceding to their conservative demands in contrast with its claims of safeguarding women’s rights (Yacoubi 2016).

The 2011 revolution and its aftermath also transformed this landscape, allowing a multitude of new actors to emerge but also giving rise to a more fragmented and divided playing field. Feminist groups and women’s organizations were active and vocal agents of the revolution, and thus took a greater part in shaping the post-transition political landscape (Moghadam 2018). As such, new groups began to organize activities, such as faith-based organizations largely funded by the states of the Gulf that seek to provide in-kind aid and services to their coreligionists and espouse an ideology that supports the re-Islamization of public space. Moreover, beginning in the 90s and persisting with the emergence of a plethora of new organizations in the past decade, international agencies have become more prominent actors and agents in the arena of women’s issues worldwide. In Tunisia, this has meant that funding and partnerships have become available on behalf of global organizations such as Oxfam, UN Women, and others to conduct research on women’s affairs and provide services and aid to those in need. These agencies, however, also tend to be in partnership with the state and thus rarely critique the latter’s policies and reforms. Conversely, the international donors themselves create a new hierarchy wherein they may impose their own plan of action without consultation with local actors. Such agendas usually focus on developmental issues such as education or labor force participation, without a critical lens towards structural issues that may require deeper transformations (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014).

*COVID-19 in Tunisia and its Response*

It is in this climate that the COVID-19 pandemic has struck Tunisia. The state was quick to announce public health measures subsequently used round the world, such as a comprehensive lockdown policy, social distancing requirements, and an extensive health awareness campaign. Those restrictions have however since been relaxed, which has led to a spike in cases that has pressured the government to return to its previous stance. Apart from these efforts to contain the spread of the virus, which was hailed by many in the early months of the pandemic as largely successful, the government also announced a social protection rescue package that would target those at most risk of financial loss and instability with various types of aid. Lastly, a broad program was initiated that would seek to minimize shocks to the Tunisian economy by attracting investors and rehabilitating certain sectors of the economy that would be most affected by the global economic downturn resulting from the pandemic. This section will review the contents of all three of these state measures and analyze the gendered implications of all of them. This will further be used in order to understand the position that feminist organizations have come to play in response to state action, and how they address the strengths and weaknesses of what these programs have to offer with regards to the gendered effects of the pandemic.

A few days after the first case was announced in Tunisia, the government of premier Elyes Fakhfakh was granted power to rule by executive order and launched a large public communications campaign while ensuring the continuation of public services. The first actions involved public health measures such as suspension of schools, earlier closure times for cafes and restaurants, closure of collective prayer spaces, suspension of travel to and from certain destinations, and 14-day quarantining for travelers. The second phase, after the first death registered in Mahdia, involved total confinement through the imposition of a curfew and an internal ban on travel. The state would also impose compulsory confinement for those who test positive for the COVID-19 virus (Brésillon and Meddeb 2020, UNDP and MDICI 2020). All of these rules would effectively be enforced through the deployment of the military. As new cases dipped as a result of such extensive measures, the state announced that it would begin a progressive deconfinement process, which subsequently saw a new spike in cases that continues at the time of this writing and precipitated a second lockdown.

Prior to the spike, Tunisia was hailed as a success in the management of the crisis and a model to emulate. These accolades also came in response to the plethora of social protection measures announced in order to support those may lose their employment or financial security during this time. In March 2020, the government announced it would be spending 250 million Tunisian Dinars (TND) in social assistance as well as and 300 million TND in support for small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and outlined its measures accordingly. Moreover, it announced that it would extend credit to businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector, which would be greatly affected by the crisis. It also arranged for the addition of more ICU beds, while the central bank gave a loan to the ministry of health for medical equipment, created a fund for the support of the public health establishment, and deferred loan repayment. The state was also supported by various waves of international aid from Europe, the IMF, and other countries (Oxford Business Group 2020).

The state also created the national COVID committee as well as a monitoring authority, which was responsible for the supply of basic products and foodstuffs, the distribution of social assistance in coordination with the former. It allocated one-time lump sums of financial aid to several categories of people. These consisted in low-income households, households which comprise an elderly or disabled person, and households with children that do not have parental support who would receive a one-off payment of 68 USD. Moreover, it offered a one-off sum of 68 USD to 623 thousand households working in the informal sector and not already covered by any social assistance program, as well as those households deemed vulnerable. As such, the proportion of people receiving cash transfers in Tunisia increased from 9.46% of the population prior to the pandemic to 40% as of July 2020. The state also implemented some social insurance measures including paid leaves for those who fall ill from COVID-19 as well as health insurance coverage for all workers. It also increased pensions, disability assistance and social security entitlements for those who partially lost their work (Gentilini et al. 2020).

Part of the funding received by the Tunisian state in order to manage the crisis was also earmarked for an economic rescue plan, targeting the sectors most affected by the pandemic and subsequent shutdown, as well as attempting to rehabilitate the economy. Such measures are relevant for our purposes as many women work in the sectors most affected by the global and national downturn. Analysts particularly highlighted the vulnerability of SMEs – 97.3% of Tunisian enterprises – and microenterprises, the latter of which is overwhelmingly run by women, especially in areas such as hospitality, restaurants, textiles, garments, and so on. A joint report by the Tunisian government and UNDP highlighted the increase in poverty rates, growing from 15.5% to 19.7% of women compared to from 14.8% to 18.7% of men (UNDP 2020). In accordance to this, the report anticipates a decline in inequality of incomes and opportunities. There has been a shock on demand for work, affecting the informal sector as well, with decrease in sources of revenue and work hours raising informal work positions. Agriculture, as well as related industries such as food production, is one of the sectors that will be most impacted (ElKadhi et al. 2020). Agriculture workers and industrial laborers are set to be the most affected moreover, of which many are women as noted above. Women will suffer the economic consequences of the pandemic considerably more than men in nearly every category of employment.

The Tunisian state, led by premier Fakhfakh, sought to reassure foreign investors and attract them towards opportunities within the territory, offering support to a handful of industries, including tourism. Otherwise, the Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation created a private sector support unit to encourage Tunisian and foreign investors to continue their activities., along with Investment promotion agencies (IPAs). These efforts are mostly focused on sectors in which investment was already encouraged and on the rise in 2019, that is to say mechanical and electric industries, and the manufacture of construction products, ceramic and glass. Other industrial production is also gaining in importance, specifically higher value fields such as pharmaceuticals, electronics, automotive industries and aeronautics (Oxford Business Group 2020).

*Evaluating the Tunisian Response*

While many have lauded the Tunisian response and commended both its efficacy in curtailing the spread of the virus as well as its substantial provisions to support vulnerable households and sectors of the economy which suffered from the lockdown. With that said, many critics have also highlighted what is absent from most reporting by donors and international agencies on the Tunisian pandemic response plan, which are issues that local activists have been vocal about for many years as international media glossed over these same issues in order to celebrate the Middle East’s “only successful democratic transition” post-Arab spring.

The first glaring gap, one that has plagued Tunisia for many decades, is the inequality between urban and coastal cities and the rural interior. This has been a constant source of criticism towards the government on behalf of local activists, especially in light of the lack of change neither actively nor discursively on that level post-Ben Ali (Marzouki and Meddeb 2015). Such discrepancies have seen themselves reproduced and exacerbated in the times of COVID-19. While the Tunisian state did indeed expand its medical services provision and particularly the availability of its ICU beds and ventilators, these are seriously lacking in the rural interior. Moreover, hospitals and clinics, which are scarce, are often hard to reach and require significant travel. Public health infrastructure, as well as social security, had already been suffering from waves of neoliberalization that took away sources of much-needed funding, making decent healthcare unaffordable to many (Lamloum 2020, Ben Youssef 2020). These vulnerabilities are important to note as rural women represent one of the poorest demographics of Tunisia, for which infection with COVID-19 would represent as such a great physical and economic threat.

These inequalities are also exacerbated by the Tunisian state’s investment priorities. As seen above, the government and its FIPA are focused on elevating high value-added industries such as the pharmaceuticals, electronics, and aeronautics, and automotive industries. While the government has directly offered support to the tourism industry, the state has not shown any interest in supporting sectors where women form the majority of the workforce. In fact, investment has instead seen a decrease in such industries as textiles and garments, as well as in agriculture, production of foodstuffs and food processing more broadly. While investment is in no way a guarantee of the improvement of the labor conditions of its workers, the Tunisian state has nevertheless laxed possible “obstructions to enterprise” such as labor codes and financial regulations across all sectors. As such, job loss, informality, and more precarious employment are likely to be aggravated for many women working in these already underserviced sectors. A prime example of such negligence of women laboring in these sectors under such conditions has been the outcry over the “trucks of death” (Dejoui 2019). Leftist parties, unions, and feminist groups have all denounced the structures that lead women agricultural workers to be overcrowded in lorries and vans in guise of transport to their workplace, despite this means being supposedly illegal. Such methods often lead to tragic accidents and deaths, especially considering the dangerous unpaved roads they cross. During the pandemic, no measures have been taken to tend to such issues, given how pressing they were even prior to the crisis. As the economy re-opens and the spikes in cases emerge, these perilous elements of working women’s life will become all the more overwhelming. Despite the government providing some aid to households in informal labor, this small one-off amount does not suffice to provide any type of even medium-term relief.

The priorities of the new Tunisian government under Fakhfakh and Saied, despite its being newly formed within a contested and unstable political landscape, seem to follow those of their predecessors. Just as has been prevalent since the 1980s, the issue of debt servicing still takes the forefront of much political activity and policymaking. The stimulus package as well as social safety net have already been described as a “significant burden on the financial sector” (Oxford Business Group 2020), given how much the country is stricken with debt, and it seems its servicing will remain the prime path followed by the government, thus pointing to an even more austere future. Meanwhile, the government has taken advantage of the frail climate and the pandemic in order to push for authoritarian and repressive reforms that would deter those mobilizing for rights, including feminist activists. This comprises, for example, laws protecting and granting impunity to police officers, as well as lockdown rules conveniently set on the anniversary of the Jasmine revolution. Despite these impediments, feminist groups continue to demonstrate on the streets, leading to mass arrests and overnight detentions, regardless of health concerns.

On another front, violence against women has seen a sharp rise under lockdown conditions, a trend seen globally as mentioned previously. It is worth noting that Tunisia is one of the few countries in which such data is to an extent available and accessible, largely due to the efforts of women’s collectives, feminist institutions, and sometimes the collaboration and involvement of the Ministry of Women, the Family, Children, and the Elderly. As such, women’s domestic abuse hotline, managed by the ministry and local NGOs, reported a one-third increase in calls and complaints. With that said, again echoing trends worldwide, formal denouncements have decreased, partly due to the fact noted previously that women have less of a chance to escape their abuse and find an opportunity, or even support systems, that would encourage them to lodge a formal complaint. But this is also due to the fact that officials are informally turning women away based on their own judgments that such cases are not critical at the moment and that they are not a proper use of their time. Many women reported being mocked and dismissed at the moment of filing their complaint, dissuading them from pursuing any further action (Asharq al-Awsat 2020, Boukhayatia 2020, UNWomen 2020).

Women’s groups, however, have been vocal on many of these issues. Both grassroots activists and more established organizations have all discussed a variety of the topics mentioned above and have made use of their online presence as well as traditional media in order to make these issues known and discussed publicly and across the nation. Women’s mobilization in Tunisia has on several occasions successfully pressured the state to reconsider and reform policies that discriminate against women, and the pandemic period is no exception. As such, when women’s groups decried the consideration of women’s shelters and abuse hotlines as “non-essential” and thus the state’s imposition of the suspension of their services, the decision was subsequently reversed. The same occurred with a ruling that deemed domestic violence, harassment, and sexual abuse cases “non-urgent” and thus suspended corresponding judicial proceedings (UNWomen 2020a). Yet, women still report that denunciation of violence and abuse often amounts to nothing as they are often told by officers and clerks to return to their abusers, their concerns ridiculed or belittled. Such types of more structural issues remain a problem, despite the existence of a legal framework to address them. A lingering issue is also the state’s, specifically the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Family and Children’s lack of capacity and experience to tend directly to those problems. A consequence has been the state’s reliance on civil society organizations to fill the gaps, namely in its integration of feminist organizations’ domestic violence hotlines, shelters, and support staff.

For this reason, another consequence of this pandemic is the increased collaboration and solidarity between feminist groups of all kinds across Tunisia’s civil society landscape. As new radical groups emerge that are concerned with marginalized groups not usually considered by the state or less tended to by institutional feminist organizations – such as LGBTQ folks, migrants, and sex workers – their collaboration with groups such as ATFD and AFTURD has allowed their concerns to become clearer and better integrated to these institutions’ agendas that benefit from less scrutiny on behalf of the state. This is the case even when these new concerns might be dismissed by the state itself as a low priority. Such collaborations and engagements have also resulted in large scale service provision for those in immediate need of monetary or in-kind aid. Yet as mentioned above, inequalities remain in the scope of activities according to regional differences, especially in the rural interior where more strategic approaches may be undervalued amongst needy communities in favor of immediate help.

Feminist organizations have thus denounced how the formal recognition of many of the aforementioned problems by the state and its legal reforms have not translated into a committed application of the laws, more monetary support for the issues, and a greater role, importance and capacity granted to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Family and Children that is still considered as concerned with “specialized interests”. The more formal feminist organizations, such as ATFD and AFTURD, seem to occupy an ambivalent position with regards to the need for such large structural changes, beyond simple legal reform. While the organizations are vocal, active, and critical to shedding light on injustices such as those delineated above, and have triggered concrete changes in government stances, they also at times fall back into developmentalist discourses that stress minor and marginal measures, sometimes even regressive policies as a substitute for more fundamental changes. As such, in partnerships with international agencies and donors, they may resort to the same type of financial aid promoted by the former, such as microfinance, privatization, credit, and other forms of neoliberalizations that have proved so costly for rural and urban women alike. Such is the precarious line to tread for many feminist institutions receiving formal recognition and international funding across the Global South and is a characteristic of the complexity of such organizations and points to the internal differences and debates that may exist within them.

**Lebanon**

*The Ponzi Economy*

Understanding the Lebanese economy is no simple undertaking. The day to day functioning and revenue of the state are opaque, contradictory, and thoroughly inaccessible to the general public. The same can be said of the position of women, as data collection in general is not the state’s strong suit due to structural weaknesses as well as political conflicts. The recent collapse of the economic order is certainly an indicator of such murkiness as well as a further source of confusion for many seeking concrete figures. As such, we begin with very little available information, but it is nevertheless possible to distinguish certain patterns and draw certain conclusions.

Lebanon is a service economy, relying mostly on the revenue generated by remittances and its now ailing financial sector. Its economy is thus dependent on banking, consumption and construction and real estate within the services sector, notably. In order to support the economy, the state has enabled the high pricing of commodities, and increased their profitability by ensuring low wages of workers (Gaspard 2003, Baumann 2016a, Baumann 2016b). Though labor organizations and unions (syndicates) exist, they are intricate institutions that have been overrun by sectarian politics since the civil war and are vehicles for patronage and clientelism rather than workers’ rights. Lebanon also sees a large part of its workforce laboring in the informal economy, at 44% of the total working population in 2009, the only available data (Ajluni and Kawar 2015). These laborers are not officially registered by the state as workers nor entitled to benefits. The conditions that lead to this informalization are multiple, and have much to do with the lengthy, confusing, and unclear bureaucratic processes as well as expenses that they entail under the stipulations of the state. As such, this system allows for the creation of a flexible and cheap labor force that is easily exploitable given that it both operates in an unregulated market and is barred from access to any protective mechanisms or political representation. It is essential to note that many of these comprise refugees, who make up about 1.7 million of Lebanon’s population of 6.8 million. Refugees are not allowed to work in the formal economy, and thus are condemned to be working informally to make a living in Lebanon. Moreover, “crackdowns” on refugee labor, especially Syrians, takes place often, arresting Syrian refugees found working informally on dubious legal claims, buttressed by a racist political climate encouraging such acts of discrimination amongst refugees from Syria, Palestine, and others (Kranz 2018).

In October 2019, the announcement of yet another increase in regressive taxes such as VAT as well as on the use of everyday goods and services launched widespread outrage, especially as news of an impending economic crisis spread widely. Lebanese people of all classes, confessions, and persuasions flooded the streets across many major cities as well as small towns, denouncing the mismanagement of the country by its ruling political elite, and demanding the fall of the regime. The political class quickly scrambled to consolidate its position and used various means to diminish or disperse the protests, going from violent repression to sectarian discourse to co-optation and appropriation of the protests. Yet as those strategies were being developed, the mask soon fell off on claims the economy and local currency were healthy and doing well. Despite governor of the central bank Riad Salameh claiming no capital controls would be imposed, local banks suddenly ceased allowing depositors to withdraw their money in USD, pointing to possibly depleted foreign reserves and an incoming liquidity crisis. Large depositors and those connected with the political elite, however, were later found to have transferred their deposits out of the country without obstruction (Baumann 2020, Berthier 2020).

A parallel “black” market for foreign currency thus emerged, seeing the currency depreciate by as much as three times its value. Attempts at regulating this “black market” composed of exchange bureaus did not stop the actual “street value” of the currency depreciating twice more, though the official rate at the banks remained fixed at the pre-crisis amount of 1 USD = 1515 Lebanese Pound (LBP). Hyperinflation ensued, and food prices skyrocketed as salaries became worth a fraction of their previous value. At the current time, unemployment is said to be rising steeply and rates of poverty increasing at an alarming rate, despite the lack of official figures (Chams 2020).

*A History of Lebanese Feminist Movements*

Women’s movements in Lebanon date back to at least the 19th century, where they were intertwined with worker’s mobilization and class struggle. Yet women’s organizations gained much more visibility (and were subsequently better documented) during the first few decades of the 20th century, at the time of the French mandate of Lebanon. These were inspired by similar mobilizations and debates across the Arab world, focused mainly on new issues concerning independence, voting rights, education and other forms of participation in public life. Many of these women, the *Raedat*, were part of the elites and upper classes. They made use of charitable organizations in order to advance their ideas and challenge the patriarchal social norms that they opposed (Stephan 2014).

A similar landscape existed post-1943, once Lebanon became an independent republic. More groups of elite women were formed, and took many forms, between religious, national cultural, and branches of men’s organizations. Yet the political character of the feminist struggle would soon make itself visible, with the development of the electoral law. Feminists were now organizing specifically around the patriarchal legal codes that barred them from many rights activists had been advocating for previously. In 1951, the Women Solidarity Association and the Lebanese Union of Women were formed, though separated along sectarian lines. In 1952, these groups consolidated under the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW), an umbrella organization og mostly religious and sectarian collectives. The LCW, which persists to this day, positioned itself as the mouthpiece of the Lebanese feminist movement but was mostly concerned with providing social services on an everyday basis (Civil Society Knowledge Centre n.d.).

Scholars and writers have also identified a “second wave of Lebanese feminism” that followed the one above, this one gaining prominence throughout the second half of the 20th century, specifically around the late 1960s and the period characterized by the decline of Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East. Women’s movements initially concentrated around humanitarian issues and found support in Fouad Chehab’s welfarist presidency, but a new type of leftist organizing also found its footing by associating with political parties, such as the Lebanese Democratic Gathering of Women – which exists and is active to this day. The League of Lebanese Women’s Rights was formed around this time and given formal recognition around 1970, still focused on issues of political participation. But these debates would soon be overshadowed by the urgency of tending to the tragic consequences of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and providing immediate aid for victims and refugees (ibid).

As the civil war ran its course, global transformations such as the UN’s Decade for Women were also affecting the way that women’s affairs were being discussed worldwide. Feminist debates would consequently see a large part of the issues discussed at the time reproduced and adapted in various contexts: gender pay gaps, political leadership of women, gender-based violence, and other similar themes would become discussed broadly. In Lebanon, this phenomenon saw fruition through the emergence of several NGOs, especially during the 1990s, focused on development, legal reforms, and gender mainstreaming. These organizations, often organized around a handful of concrete issues, mobilized and pressured the state to enact feminist policies and transformations. They were supported by the simultaneous increase in the availability of funding for these types of projects, especially on behalf of international agencies and feminist donors. While such groups managed to raise many topics into public awareness and gathered much support, the government remained intransigent on conceding to their demands and showed little interest in reforming the state in favor of gender equality and liberty (Moughalian and Ammar 2019). Moreover, the NGOs’ focus on lobbying and their developmentalist approach prevented them from obtaining more outreach, positioned women on the ground as beneficiaries rather than partners, and likewise set them apart from more grassroots types of organizing.

It is from these gaps that emerged what has been dubbed the “fourth wave of Lebanese feminism”, representing a cluster of collectives and groups, influenced by academic works and novel modes of organizing, that deployed a more grassroots approach and advocate for more radical conceptions of gender and gender freedoms. These groups tackled new issues and strived for a more inclusive feminist environment, shedding light on neglected themes such as LGBTQ+ rights and justice, sexual and reproductive health, and so on. Such groups have an ambivalent relationship with the NGOs described above, as well as a complicated view of funding and activities. While some provide immediate services, other work on grassroots organization and community building. Some have received funding from international donors while others shun the idea, fearing that such revenue would disrupt their way of doing things and impose donors’ opposed agendas (ibid). Such attitudes generate a difficulty in running operations and thus make it difficult for members to dedicate themselves to work full-time, as well as limit outreach and communications with other groups. While a few have established close links and have worked in collaboration with development-oriented NGOs, others refuse this on the same ground, facing similar issues with outreach and influence. Relations with the LCW are complex as well; some existing feminist groups support it as a welcome state investment in women’s issues and collaborate with it on that basis, while others reject it entirely, criticizing it as window-dressing, unfeminist, unwilling to challenge the state, and not concerned with entire segments of the population such as LGBTQ folks and migrants that may also suffer from patriarchal practices. Others, while acknowledging these serious shortcomings, still maintain a pragmatic relationship with the LCW in order to gain resources and connections to further their outreach and capacity to implement their initiatives.

*Lebanon, COVID-19, and Everything Else*

It is thus within this difficult and chaotic landscape that COVID-19 hit Lebanon. The first case was announced in February 2020, and a few days later comprehensive lockdown measures were imposed. Economic activities were halted, schools were closed, gatherings prohibited, travel to and from certain destinations banned, and the military deployed in order to ensure the enforcement of quarantine measures. The Ministry of Health also initially announced that all those who were found to test positive for COVID-19 and needed hospitalization would be treated at a reduced cost. The World Bank assisted to that end with a loan of 20 million USD and a further allocation of 40 million USD in order to strengthen the ministry’s capacity, equip public hospitals, and scale up testing and treatment. Paid sick leave was also to be provided to medical staff in isolation, or those who contract the virus (OECD 2020, Gentilini et al. 2020).

The country stands to be greatly affected by the crisis induced by the pandemic, first and foremost given its impact on remittances, a large source of revenues for the Lebanese nation. Job losses, travel restrictions, and other types of economic changes are severely affecting the Lebanese diaspora’s ability to send money back, especially from Europe and the Gulf, the latter of which has also suffered a severe shock due to the decrease in oil prices and lower demand as a result of the pandemic. The tourism sector, which had already been on the decline in the past years due to political instability and tension, is also set to be severely hit. The agricultural sector’s situation has also worsened, having been already harmed by the economic crisis and the lack of access to seeds, fertilizers, technology, and so on. Moreover, health care is likely to become progressively less accessible, as public hospitals lack the infrastructure and equipment to properly deal with the crisis and private hospitals remain extremely expensive due to chronic privatization, while other health centers may be only accessible through patron-client relationships and good favor with political parties (OECD 2020).

In March 2020, the government of Lebanon approved an emergency stimulus package in response to the economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The package consists of 1.2 trillion LBP to be used to provide aid to low-income families in the country as well as support the agriculture and industrial sectors, in particular health care employees, farmers, public sector workers and SMEs. The new package aims to provide 200,000 families with a monthly cash payment of 400,000 LBP, and SMEs, farmers, and vocational workers with one-off payments (Azhari 2020). The army has also taken charge of distributing 18 billion LBP’s worth in food aid, in coordination with municipalities. The state also announced it would subsidize a package of essential goods in order to protect low income households from rising inflation and ensure the product’s accessibility to everyone during the difficult time of the pandemic and despite the mass layoffs and pay decreases it triggered. The package included dairy products, eggs, rice, men’s razors, soap, and so on. Yet the governor of the central bank recently announced in August 2020 that subsidies of the sort would soon be discontinued due to the depletion of foreign reserves (Al-Arabiya 2020). This would also affect subsidies that existed prior to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis, such as those on fuel, bread, and so on, which, despite leakages to the non-poor and nepotism and political manipulation, are still essential and critical to many vulnerable households across the country.

The already alarming situation of the country only deteriorated further after the explosion at the Beirut port on August 4, 2020. The blast flattened Lebanon’s main and largest port, which receives the vast majority of its imports, on which it is reliant given the weakness of its agricultural and industrial sectors. 200 people lost their lives and an estimated 300,000 lost their homes, among whom many that cannot afford to find an alternative living space. Hospitals were soon overwhelmed and turned away injured people seeking care, while the government offered no assistance apart from exemptions from certain medical fees by the Ministry of Public Health. As such, aid and assistance came mostly from NGOs and civil society, who provided mostly in-kind aid such as food and reconstruction services. International aid, however, flowed into the state, sparking scandals of corruption and graft as to their final use (BBC 2020, Malik and Haidar 2020).

*Evaluating the Lebanese Response*

It is difficult to make a critique of the Lebanese state’s COVID-19, economic crisis, and Beirut blast response as it is in its own words “a non-welfare system” (Makram Malaeb as cited in Karam, Zureiqat and Rammal 2015), and the policies in that regard have largely followed this self-identification. Food aid was quickly exhausted, international assistance put to obscure use, and people soon found themselves with no one to turn to as politicians told tales of impending doom and exhaustion of foreign reserves. As a result, the little assistance given was not nearly enough to sustain people even through the most difficult moments of the pandemic and economic crisis.

In fact, the little provisions and social assistance given were found over time to be seriously flawed, especially in matters concerning the gendered aspects of the pandemic. Despite supposed protection for medical staff and practitioners, nurses in Lebanon, who are mostly women and have for long been in great shortage of supply, were “laid off” but retained to work for little no pay, and refugees were also recruited into this occupation that is normally barred to them, to be done now for little money and no possibility of any social security (OECD 2020a). For such cases, the extension of the labor law concerning medical leave in case they contract COVID-19 has little significance as it may apply only to formal workers. Informal workers were not accounted for in any way, which is unsurprising as they are not even considered discursively as a theme worthy of discussion by the Lebanese state or the ministry of labor.

Women in these precarious situations, as such, are not receiving any sort of assistance apart from the few who received the food and in-kind aid described above. These packages have been criticized for their apparently random and less than rigorous distribution, sparking concerns about possible leakages and a lack of transparency and accountability leading to nepotism and clientelism (Malik and Haidar 2020). The state’s uneven, corrupt, and non-transparent aid distribution has seriously damaged people’s confidence and trust, and these have instead turned to political parties or civil society organizations in order to fill the gaps. As such, while the multiple crises and the pandemic in particular have limited feminist groups’ activities, especially in terms of mobilization, political discourse, and organizing, many organizations have doubled down on service provision, at the expense of other initiatives given these unprecedented times. While this work is essential and many communities are in urgent need of aid and relief, the sole focus on service provision requires delineating specific beneficiaries and as such leads to fragmentation and the limiting of the possibility of articulating a large inclusive vision for those worst hit by the crises.

The lack of women as well as gender sensitivity in the design of state crisis-response policies is very clear, as no concern has been given to female headed households that are the most vulnerable and exposed to poverty, nor has any attention been paid to the possibility of unequal access to resources within the family or household unit and the possibility of giving aid to women and its consequences. Another very concrete display of this lack of commitment to gender equality and social justice has been the conspicuous absence of sanitary pads or tampons in the package of subsidized goods, which was quickly denounced by feminists and NGOs (Al-Arabiya 2020a). With that said, the news was quickly overshadowed by doomsday prophecies by the central bank governor of the possibility that all subsidies be discontinued either way due to the depletion of foreign reserves. Yet while the crisis has spun a new wave of general discontent amongst the population, activist groups and new anti-sectarian and anti-establishment political formations have not always acknowledged the impact of the economic, political, and health emergencies on women and have not systematically integrated these into their projects or agendas. Those feminist activists that do raise these issues to the state are often dismissed as preoccupied with a minor, overly specific issues and are told to pick and choose their struggles and are relegated to a lower priority. As such, gender mainstreaming on all levels, be it in finding alternative economic and political projects or in state policy, leaves much to be desired as feminist issues are boxed in and marginalized as low-priority or “specialized” interests rather than an overarching and systematic issue that concerns everyone. The same has been observed with mobilizing and lobbying that concerns other marginalized groups or that takes an intersectional approach, such as with LGBTQ or migrant communities.

The state has shown a total disregard with respect to the latter categories. With respect to refugees and migrant workers, no sort of assistance was provided, in accordance with their strategy of marginalization pre-COVID and pre-economic crisis. Beyond that, it has acted to further criminalize refugees under the pretext of the arduous economic and political moment, particularly Syrians, rendering them gaining their livelihoods and increasingly difficult endeavor (Kimball, Gramer and Detsch 2020). An alleged reform to the exploitative Kafala system – a system likened to modern-day slavery by which employers “sponsor” foreign migrant workers, effectively gaining almost total legal control over them with the ability to confiscate their personal documentation – has been announced in September 2020 by the ministry of labor, but legal activists and scholars have pointed out that this does not constitute a commitment to enforcement and accountability and therefore hardly counts as the “abolition of the Kafala system” that was suggested by the ministry (HRW 2020, Khalil 2020). This has left these two groups in the most vulnerable positions, especially as their livelihoods are significantly more precarious than other demographics’, with higher proportions of informal and low wage work, in vulnerable sectors such as domestic work, and live in highly concentrated spaces due to high rents across the country. As such, they are at higher risk of infection, job loss, and other types of liabilities. The migrant workers’ domestic union, which would be a powerful collective for advocating for workers’ rights, has not been formally recognized and has even been denounced by the state.

For people in this predicament, and especially women who comprise the majority of this category, the only resort in this case is international agencies, or civil society groups and organizations. In this case, it is mostly the sort of initiatives that seek to provide short term immediate aid to the most vulnerable. Actors range from UNHCR to small Ethiopian collectives such as Egna Legna, and these associations have proven remarkably skilled at mobilizing resources and tending to the most affected by these difficult times. The same can be said of any other issue impacting women; This is the case with the spikes in violence against women that are mostly catered to by the hotlines and support centers of collectives and NGOs such as the LDGW and KAFA, a phenomenon that has remained unacknowledged by the state even as cases were being reported daily. Give the void of government support, feminist organizations and NGOs have shown remarkable solidarity in order to keep providing services for survivors of domestic abuse in these uncertain and difficult times, despite the overall fragmented and limited landscape of feminist activism at the moment.

**Conclusion**

A case study between Tunisia and Lebanon is particularly revealing given the difference in their portrayal on a global scale. Both are usually identified as some of the less conservative states in the Middle East with regards to women’s rights and liberties, but while the former has been touted worldwide as a success story especially post-Jasmine revolution, the latter is generally depicted as a struggling weak state ailing from a number of different problems. It is these similarities and distinctions that make for an interesting comparison and allow to draw some conclusions on the position of women’s movements in the region.

The most flagrant difference between the two countries on that regard is that one has, despite limitations and controversy, historically shown some form of commitment to women’s rights and issues, while the other has scarcely even discursively shown a long-term interest in promoting these. While both states are not fully receptive to the demands of women’s groups, the Tunisian state has however been relatively more responsive to certain criticisms and complaints on behalf of feminist organizations and reformed targeted laws, while presenting certain avenues for engagement with feminist groups, while the Lebanese state has hardly matched this sensitivity, with the only major achievement in recent years being the outlawing of conjugal rape in 2017. The situation with COVID has proved no different, with issues raised by feminists and activists being regarded more seriously in Tunisia than in Lebanon, as the examples showed above, even as the regimes in both countries often relegated these matters to a low-priority “special interest”.

With that said, there are certain patterns that activists must be weary of. The pandemic has exacerbated issues that have for the most part been prevalent prior to the crisis, and women’s groups have done a great job in articulating these problems and bringing them to the forefront of activist discourse, especially with new, radical groups taking on intersectional approaches and shedding light on the plight of certain overlooked marginalized groups despite their limited field of action. Yet it must be noted that simply lobbying the government to enact legal reforms is not enough, as has been seen in the Tunisian case. Both countries see a large part of its activist landscape made up of development-oriented organizations and international agencies acting at least partly in partnership with the state. Yet even if the state were receptive to such reforms and transformations, this does not ensure that the “trucks of death” disappear even if they are made illegal, or that police stations would welcome domestic violence claims with open arms even if they are considered essential by the courts. Many of these issues are thus also a matter of the functioning of national and informal economies as well as the patriarchal assumptions prominent in society. The recognition of these obstacles is as such critical and must be part of feminist discourse. As such, more structural changes must be sought out, and especially more support must be found for those grassroots organizations that do seek to provide spaces for women to articulate a more liberatory politic, one that may be at times directly at odds with states’ visions for society and economy and that these may find impossible to accommodate as a secondary and non-disruptive reform.

What is certain is that women’s movements and feminist organizations continue to do an admirable job and tremendous effort to provide services, aid, as well as safe spaces for a variety of different demographics that are affected by the gendered aspects of the pandemic as well poverty and political crisis. Unfortunately, they must do so given the absence of state provisions and arrangements for these types of needs and must often forsake other types of militancy and solidarity in order to provide these, given the urgency to fulfill certain demands. It is this type of landscape that women’s movements must face in the Middle East today, regardless of the degree of commitment to women’s liberations that their states have proclaimed. While the pandemic has rightfully brought many of the issues outlined above to light, the challenges in making structural and transformative changes remain pressing.

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