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# THE CULTURE OF MOTHERHOOD: AN AVENUE FOR WOMEN'S CIVIL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH LEBANON

ZEINA ZAATARI



## INTRODUCTION

Whereas the mother is the structure and basis for the building of a happy *'usra* (household/family), whereas society is a natural result of a set of congruent and harmonious families and households, and whereas the child is the ripe fruit of this interaction, for all that, one of the main concerns of the association was the mother on the one hand and the child on the other (Jam'iyyat Taqādum al-Mar'a al-Khayriyya/Women's Charitable Association brochure).

In moments of crisis and conflict, the images of women organizing to provide resources for their families is all too common in the Arab World (and elsewhere). Palestinian women in refugee camps in Lebanon worked together in networks, committees, associations, and in political parties or wings at times (Sayigh and Peteet 1986; Peteet 1991, 1997; Sayigh 1996). Artexaga (1997) argues that women in Northern Ireland transformed the meaning of motherhood and extended it beyond the domestic to include mothering of the public as the political conflict literally moved into their homes. Some women of the South had benefited from years of political organizing. Housewives and mothers, on the other hand, have a network of neighbors, friends, and families with whom they organize weddings, job searches, funerals, and

a myriad of other events, fulfilling their roles as mothers. Women's roles as mothers allow them to connect families by creating, reinforcing, and maintaining networks and relationships, allowing them to deploy idioms of kinship with "strangers" or authoritative figures, providing them with the "uncontested" access to the public domain as mothers of all. Moments, or even in the case of the Palestinians and Lebanese, years of conflict and war, can be seen as "abnormal times" in which transgressions may be tolerated for the good of all. However, women in South Lebanon believe and practice motherhood beyond the domestic during moments of "peace" as well.<sup>1</sup>

The Southern Lebanese women discussed in this article exemplify those diverse patterns of activism in civil society. For some, religion has informed their choices and practices, aiming to promote changes within their immediate locales and in the "nation"<sup>2</sup> in general. For others, visions of social justice and egalitarian societies inform the life choices they make. Despite their differences, they all seem to place a great deal of importance on the woman as "mother" of her family and of her society. "It is women that make men, fighters, and society," one Hizbullah spokesperson explained. All the members of Hizbullah I interviewed used the same proverb to emphasize the importance of motherhood in society, saying, "The woman that rocks the cradle with her right rocks the world with her left."

This article discusses the culture of motherhood as an avenue for civil participation in Lebanon and specifically in South Lebanon. I argue that this motherhood discourse allows a woman to be politically and culturally active within her community and to create changes in her environment. The subjectivity of women in South Lebanon and perhaps in Lebanon in general is shaped by the culture of motherhood. They are able to be citizens and to be agentive in civil society through the discourse and praxis of the culture of motherhood. At the same time, however, this avenue is not the only one for women's political participation. Elsewhere, I discuss the role that war and conflict, as well as Arab nationalism, have played in women's overt political participation in South Lebanon. Whereas the first (motherhood) is a more dominant discourse, the second has and still is a possible and lively one for political participation, although the two are not mutually exclusive and often have overlapped.

The Southern Lebanese women I interviewed are both diverse and similar but always agentive; they are active in making choices, in creating

situations and contexts, and in resisting what they deem to be repressive and exploitative. Nonetheless, they have contributed to the reproduction of oppressive patterns, including patriarchal structures. Secular feminists have been able to partake in political life through struggles of nationalism, liberation, and social justice, while religious-based activism aims to produce a Muslim alternate modernity. A woman's participation in the so-called "public" realm is thus no longer questioned, since she is being a mother to society, adhering to a culturally prescribed role that most of the time may fit with rather than challenge the patriarchal structure. At the same time, the emphasis on motherhood in Lebanese discourse (Joseph 1994, 1999c; Zaatari 2003) and the practice and meaning of motherhood are shaped by a women's subjectivity, politically, religiously, and economically. I argue then that the meaning of motherhood is not static but can and has been redefined through women's practices in different sociopolitical moments.

Family life in the Middle East and specifically in the case of Lebanon is of utmost importance. During the war years and a very prolonged period of conflict in the South, the state, with all of its institutions, was relatively absent, and the family (or more generally the kin) has continued to replace it (Joseph 1994, 1999c; King-Irani 2000). Today, families continue to provide their members with resources be it food, shelter, or jobs. The emphasis on individuals' roles as family members then comes as no surprise. The mother role can extend itself beyond the domains of the family and into society, and as such makes it legitimate for women who might otherwise be expected to stay in the domestic realm to venture visibly into and act within the public realm. Even when women do not adhere to an ideology that prefers and values the role of motherhood, they are still given that privilege by being viewed as mothers of society. As such, I argue that the "culture of motherhood" constitutes only one, though very important, avenue for women's participation in civil society. Even though it appears to transcend history in the sense that motherhood has always existed, it is a product of particular historical and cultural trajectories. The concept of motherhood has transformed over the years and has changed the practice and meaning of citizenship.

Post-civil war transformations, religious identity or an increased religiosity, and harsh economic conditions in Lebanon have promoted such behavior, allowing women to better evade patriarchal structures

and continue to be creative agents of social change. On the one hand, the elevation of the role of motherhood to the realm of sanctity seems to capture women within the domain of the domestic and thus patriarchy (under traditional conceptions of patriarchy). Yet, it is this same emphasis on her role as mother that allows her the flexibility outside the realm of the domestic. Nonetheless, this flexibility is reinforced by discourses and ideology, including religious, national, and/or cultural.

Women are complicit in the reproduction of oppressive structures such as patriarchy while engaged in practices of resistance and social change. Shireen Hassim (1993) argues "there is an underlying tension between the power that motherhood is accorded in nationalist symbolism, and the powerlessness that women experience in society" (20). Women, Hassim argues, may be labeled as martyrs and the main breeders of the struggle, yet they are often kept outside the main circles of power and decision making.

Julie Peteet (1997) aims to take the discussion on mothering and nationalism a step further by approaching "Palestinian activist mothering as a paradoxical practice that is simultaneously agential and limiting..." (103). Peteet argues that by deploying culturally accepted images and discourses, women engage actively in their society and "in the process of reconstituting the meaning of motherhood" (104). She states that the praxis itself is transformative of the meaning of motherhood and (I would add) of the women's subjectivity.

Baron's (2005) focus on nationalist women in the 1919 revolution era in Egypt engages the imagery and representation of women and how the women themselves used and deployed these images. She argues that it is important to consider women as agentive regardless of whether these actions lead them to the seats of power or, in her words, to "full citizenship." "For, in spite of the obstacles, women devised their own forms and forums for shaping the national polity. In looking at women's political culture, a dynamic picture emerges as women alternated between and among partisan, feminist, Islamist, social, and other politics in the name of nation-building" (9).

Lisa Pollard (2005), on the other hand, focuses on the family policy implications of this same period in Egypt. She indicates that women in Egypt claimed the public space to demand education and other rights, along with nationalism; they learned through the process. She adds that

“because the EFU [Egyptian Feminist Union, created by Huda Sharawi to fight for women’s equality] was not successful in attaining an active political role for women, it has been concluded that while ‘maternalism’ was successful in elevating the position of women in Egyptian society and in organizing women collectively, it failed as a concrete platform” (207). However, she argues that the acts of mothering or “maternalism” were valued qualities not only for women but for male nationalists as well. It was the way the *wafdists* portrayed and presented themselves as “modern” subjects interested in promoting a better future entrenched in a nuclear bourgeoisie notion of family.

Several decades after this period in Egypt, another era of nationalism, namely Arab nationalism, left its marks on Lebanon. In South Lebanon, women’s engagement with nationalism allowed them access to the public and political domain, which transformed their understanding of motherhood and civil society. More recently, increased religious ideology has also promoted access to civil society participation. Both of these ideologies and practices are intertwined with the culture of motherhood.

In this article, I will first outline the methodology used in this research and the sociopolitical context of the study. The focus will shift to the discourse and practices surrounding the concept and culture of motherhood in South Lebanon. I caution against associating the culture of motherhood only with Islam and Islamists, as it permeates other religious spaces in Lebanese society, including Christian sects. I also emphasize Suad Joseph’s work in this discussion, as it focuses on kinship and interfamily dynamics, namely mother-son and brother-sister relationships, and stresses the importance of mothering in the making of future citizens/family subjects.

## METHOD AND CONTEXT

Between July 1998 and December 2001, I spent a total of twenty-one nonconsecutive months in South Lebanon (including fifteen consecutive months between the fall of 2000 and the end of 2001), conducting ethnographic fieldwork aimed at understanding the subjectivities, lives, and practices of women activists. South Lebanon in general has received very little share of academic and scholarly inquiry, partly the result of continuous conflict, war, and economic marginalization. There, few

scholars have the resources and have devoted their attention to women's lives, participation in civil society, political participation, or gender relations. Having observed women's engagement and struggle as I grew up in Saida (Sidon), which is in the South, I was interested in conducting an in-depth study that could start to unravel the intricate dynamics of political struggles and personal lives within the historical, political, economic, and cultural context of the South. The research site spread over three large cities, Saida, Nabatiyya, Sur (Tyre) and the surrounding villages, and spanned a period of eight decades. During this time period, the South moved from fragmented cities to a "national" symbol of resistance. It suffered from civil wars and several occupations, including the Israeli occupation, which left its imprints on the material lives of the Southerners and their psyches. Its marginalization, though, predates this period to a previous colonial impact and the creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 (Sharif 1978:9).<sup>3</sup> The South's economy relied largely on agriculture and fishing and, in some of the larger cities, service industries. Economic marginalization was due to a coalition of interests that continued to intensify with Israel's occupation and aggression (Doumani 1974; Sharif 1978; Farsoun 1997). This coalition of feudal land-owning families and merchants in Beirut, coupled with Israeli aggression, promoted the continued marginalization of the Southerners and led to displacement, poverty, and immigration.

As a reflection of the complexity of life in South Lebanon and the processes under investigation, I used a variety of feminist ethnographic research methods. Tracing women's organizational processes and lives was an exciting opportunity to learn more about women I had known or engaged with for most of my life and to be introduced to fascinating organizations, old and new, that were working diligently toward their visions of justice and social transformation. Rummaging through conference proceeding reports (among the few places where women of the South are published) made clear women's role in "leftist" political discourses, presentations, and parties in the South in particular. Not surprisingly, women's names appeared in women- and feminist-based organizations and collectivities. However, there were more women's names than men's in rights-based, political, and charity organizations.<sup>4</sup> My focus thus centered on women activists (not necessarily always feminists), women's organizations, and economic empowerment

organizations dominated by women. Due to my interest in conducting an in-depth investigation, I focused on a number of women activists with whom I have had extensive contact and who have been active on a number of fronts, from the overtly political in the 1950s and 60s, to emergency aid during the 1970s and 80s, and to associational work in the 1990s. Since women's activism usually spanned the political, the economic, the social, and their intersections, I included at least one organization with primary interests in each of these sectors.

A life history approach to women and to the organizations themselves enriched the research with in-depth material and insight into the transformative and pivotal experiences of women's lives. The three organizations/associations<sup>5</sup> whose history I traced were *Al-Hay'at al-Nisā'iyya fi Hizbullah* (Women's Association of Hizbullah) (WAH), *Jam'iyyat Taqādum al-Mar'a al-Khayriyya* (Women's Charitable Association) (JTMK), and *Al-Majmu'a al-Jam'iyya al-Lubnaniyya lil-Tanmiya* (The Lebanese Association for Development) (The Group). Al-Majmu'a was initially established by Save the Children in 1994 as a microfinance pilot project titled the Group Guarantee Lending and Saving Project (GGLS). It quickly evolved in 1997 into an independent Lebanese organization focusing on microcredit and economic empowerment of women. JTMK has been in existence since 1969 and works toward the social transformation of women in Nabatiyya and surrounding villages. WAH, created in the late eighties, works toward promoting an alternative modernity based on Islamic principles. I interviewed several of the key leaders, founders, employees, and the "beneficiaries" and attended several events and meetings.

I also conducted life histories of six women who have been involved in a number of organizations throughout their lifetimes. These included Inaya (b. 1935), a retired schoolteacher from Saida; Sister Noon (fictional name to protect identity) (b. 1937), a nun and teacher from Bikasin, a small town near Jezzine; Um Fadi (b. 1940), a retired government employee from Kfar Tibnit, a small town east of Nabatiyya; Hajji Hala (b.1944), a teacher and ex-principal of a school from Saida; Um Ahmad (fictional name to protect identity) (b. 1932), a retired teacher and principal from Nabatiyya; and Um Adel (fictional name to protect identity) (b. 1934), a housewife from Saida.



## DISCOURSE OF THE ISLAMISTS

During my first meeting with the media director for Hizbullah, I was informed that "in the party we believe in giving a woman complete freedom to work as a partner to a man." Yet there are differences between the roles of men and women. The director explained that women are equal partners in preparing and resisting the oppressor, however, they may not be on the front lines but rather in medical and nutritional aid. Nonetheless, he added:

She is the man's partner, she believes that leadership and responsibility of the household should lie on the shoulders of one person, usually agreed amicably to be the man of the house. But he is not to take that responsibility and act on it of his own mind and will, he has to negotiate and agree with his partner on all matters.

He continued to explain that Hizbullah has employed women in all professions and that they are seriously considering introducing a woman parliamentarian. Morality and chastity (in the way men and women dress and interact) are highly appreciated values, especially for women. All those interviewed valued strongly the women who respect fighters, such as the woman who marries a wounded warrior or the one who waits for years on end until her husband returns from the battlefield or from the prisons of the enemy. There is always a special place at events allocated to the mothers of martyrs, and the mother who gives the rifle to her other son once the first becomes a martyr is respected.

The women from WAH whom I interviewed indicated they believed in equality between men and women but not in the "Western" sense of sameness (see Peteet 1997:104-5). Sacrificial (as in sacrificing her sons/labor to society) and nurturing attributes are highly valued, as both are considered motherly qualities, that of mothering society and mothering family. Her duty toward her family automatically entails a duty toward her society and the *ummah* (the Muslim community worldwide). If her society is not free, her family is not free either.

In an attempt to discuss the differences between their and their mothers' generations in terms of the relationship between parents and children, Um Mazen, a WAH activist, said, "I think that at that time parents only cared for the children's bodies, like making sure they were fed, clothed,

and healthy. They cared for their schooling but had little interest in their *rūḥ* [souls].” The assumption is that Hizbullah women now follow a more holistic approach to raising children, one that fits with an Islamic model. This way of raising children prepares them to become full participants of this Islamic society. Even as they mother their own children, they are mothering society and thus redefining the meaning of motherhood.

The director commented on the West’s misguided views of Islam and the Hizbullah party. In his opinion, Islam gave women her rights, her dignity, and her pride:

The Imam al-Khomeini said, “Both women and the Qur’an were given the responsibility of making men [*al-mar’a al-Qur’ān kilāhumē kilahuma ‘uwkil ilaiyhi sun’ al-rijal*].” If the fighter sacrifices himself, it is the woman that had made this fighter a possibility. She carries him in her womb for nine months, she gives birth to him, she teaches him, educates him, and makes him a defiant man. This is the ultimate motherhood that any person would aim to.

This almost iconic image of the role of woman—and the extreme valorization of her role in society, in the nation, in the ummah—seems to be a very prevalent discourse among Islamists. At the same time, this discourse is also popular among non-Islamists in Lebanon, as the other discourses discussed in the following sections will show. For example, in her chapter focusing on mother/son relationships as one element of interfamily dynamics in Lebanon, Suad Joseph (1999c) describes the image of the ideal mother as given by one devoted Christian son. The son indicates that the ideal mother, his mother, is basically the one who “makes men.” He adds, “She knows how to raise her son in a good way, to teach her son everything in life. She does not speak bad about people. She is well mannered.” He adds definitively, “She made me into a man” (182). This son might have been an exemplary case study; nonetheless, this example indicates that the emphasis on motherhood has a strong basis in Lebanese society, which is made stronger by religious images of Mariam and Fatima.

For many Muslims, the discourse on the valorization of motherhood is derived from the Islamic scriptures, Qur’anic verses, the *ḥadith* of the prophet, and the statements of *‘ulama* and *imams*. There are a number of stories and *ḥadith* around the value of motherhood in the

Islamic tradition. These are often told to and discussed with children during the summer Qur'an classes organized by the WAH and also told on TV series and plays on Al-Manar Television, the Hizbullah station. One story told to students by religious scholars is about a son visiting the prophet to ask about the possibility of repaying a mother's sacrifices. The son has cared for his sick mother and even carried her on his shoulders to do the pilgrimage to Mecca. The prophet tells him that all his life's work and good deeds could never equal one contraction a mother suffers while giving birth.

Another ḥadith recalls the prophet Mohamad asking a son to treat well first his mother, then his mother, then his mother, and then his father.<sup>6</sup> A very popular saying on Mother's Day that is found on posters and carved on wood states "*al-jannat taḥt aqdām al-ummahāt*" [heaven is under the feet of mothers].

Mu'aviyah ibn Jahumah reported, Jahimah came to the Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be on him, and said, O Messenger of Allah! I intended that I should enlist in the fighting force and I have come to consult thee. He said: "Hast thou a mother?" He said, Yes. He said: "Then stick to her, for paradise is beneath her two feet" (Ns. 25:6) (Ali 1978:374).

Whereas the insistence on the valorization of mothers is in accordance with Hizbullah women's perception of God's will, it is also a response to the devaluing of the role motherhood has received in the past three or four decades. This is due to the valorization in a capitalist system of paid or remunerated labor combined with the Lebanese and Arab feminist movements' call for women's work outside the home (wage labor). The next step after calling for women's formal education and equal access to knowledge was the calling for women's work as an essential element of her emancipatory project (Abdo 1980; Mansour 1996). The importance of women working was a staple element in television shows and magazine, journal, and newspaper articles in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. The reasons for the promotion of women's work ranged between conceptions of modernity, financial need, and economic empowerment toward emancipation. Abdo's (1980) research indicates that women's work was deemed very important in creating social transformation, as it leads to their participation in decision-making and will slowly transform the relationship between men and women within and without the

household. Some of Lebanon's prominent feminists, like Linda Matar, Lour Mughaizel, and Fahmiyya Sharaf ad-Din, took every opportunity to stress the importance of women's work, stressing the need for financial independence and the fulfillment of the self through work. These efforts did not necessarily lead to very high rates of employment but did manage to denigrate the role of the housewife and the domestic element. Due to its low cultural value, household work was not going to be part of men's roles within the homes as well. Thus, working women suffered from the double burden where their husbands did not share household duties. This relegated housework to a nonessential part of motherhood's role, especially for social classes able to afford a maid. One could then read Hizbullah's, including WAH's, emphasis on the role of the mother as a way to reclaim that space and role as legitimate, important, and complementary to the man's societal role.

Another dimension to consider is the perceived dichotomy between the East and the West in Hizbullah discourse. Motherhood also becomes a way of differentiating "us" from "them." "We in Islam and the East and those who care about family and morals believe in the absolute importance and value of motherhood" was a common statement by the interviewees. Um Hassan, WAH's Southern coordinator, voiced her opinion in disagreement with civil laws, assuming they would lead to "the disintegration of the family and ruining of society like in the West." Too much freedom and no moral restraints were seen as the characteristics of Western society, perceived as being in opposition to "us" (Muslims) with morals, beliefs, and family values. She added:

In the West, the girl at eighteen leaves her parents and lives with anyone in his house and this is not good. We see a society with broken families, unable to sustain family values. People are very distant from each other. There are no friends and no morals, and they live like this without goals and objectives. This way, the individual lets go of his humanity.

The difference then between the West and the Muslim Lebanese society is due to the crucial role that the mother plays in society. Motherhood, following Um Hassan's argument, is the instrument of raising children and of building a society capable of holding on to traditions and moral values, withstanding westernizations trends, and thus ensuring the qualitative difference between "us" and "them." Similar discourses

of difference that fall upon the mother and/or motherhood at large have been deployed in earlier periods of time and under different contexts. The discourse of difference, thus, reinforces the role of motherhood in society and the making of future moral subjects. According to Baron (1993, 2005), the wafdists used the discourse of morality and family honor to mobilize for Egypt against the British. Pollard (2005) reiterates the use of maternalism and motherhood to emphasize their difference from the royal family, who was engaged with the British in Egypt. Even after the revolution began, the discourse of mothering (and *tarbiyya*, or education and socialization) in “good” households to produce future citizens and enable independence was evident (188). The discourse of difference during that period in Egypt’s history was intertwined with nationalism, emphasizing one set of values over another. The Islamist discourse of Hizbullah relying on motherhood emphasized difference to promote an alternative modernity, a different set of values.

Motherhood is so valued that women need not work outside the home to gain value. WAH and Hizbullah are not opposed to women’s work, in contrast to other Islamist discourses like al-Ahbash and Jama‘a al-Islamiyya. In fact, Hizbullah is very much in favor of women’s work outside the home as long as it does not shortchange the family, a mother’s main obligation and duty as dictated by Qur’anic scriptures on the roles and duties of wives and husbands (see Mernissi 1987, 1991). Um Hassan insists that:

Women should have a profession/trade. No one knows what life could bring, and she must be strong with experience and knowledge in economic and industrial matters. She should be able to stand on her own two feet if things turn sour in her life. Every person has a capacity to learn and know, and it is good that one nourishes this capacity and learns more.

It is important, then, for the women of Hizbullah to be economic partners with their husbands but without forgetting that their primary duty is their household. When asked about the role of women in society, Um Hassan responded:

Woman is three-fourths of the society, if not more. Through different angles, we see that the role a woman plays in her family and society is very important because she is always present on the ground and in the

trenches. A man may work too many hours to provide for his family. Her role is in socializing and creating *taw'iyya* [awareness]. If she is *ṣaliḥa* [good] and does not waste time in gossip, she can change society from its worst conditions to its best through *tarbiyya* and *akhlāq* [interaction, morals, and manners]. She builds a society through her children from inside her household or outside of it. We see plenty of examples of women who have done so throughout history. The Prophet Jesus, PBOH [peace be on him], had his mother, *sitna* (our grandmother) Mariam on his side, and the Prophet Mohamad, PBOH, had his wife Khadija on his side. Women in Iran and in Lebanon stood by the Imam Khomeini. If a woman wants to have a role, she can accomplish a lot and be very useful to her society.

This quote exemplifies the complementary role men and women play in society. Her role is to support a man and their family, an enabler. Women are citizens of this society, but their citizenship is enacted and perceived differently from male citizens—that men and women have different roles in society, and a different division of labor is interpreted from the religious texts. Nonetheless, their role as citizens is crucial. Their role as mother affects and informs that notion of citizenship as their work, and “standing by” their men are deemed nurturing qualities like those shown by Mariam and Khadija.

#### DISCOURSE OF THE °ILMĀNIYYAT (SECULARISTS) AND THE KHAYRIYYAT (PHILANTHROPISTS)

We can place the Southern secularists within a larger leftist discourse, which arose from and was parallel to a context of liberation movements, nationalism, anticolonization, social justice movements, intersections of Soviet models of governance, leftist theoretical/ideological models, the encroachment of capitalism, and the effects of the Cold War. Women of the South, according to my interviews, were actively involved in political parties of the Left that worked for liberation from occupied and colonial forces and aimed for some form of social justice based loosely on a Marxist ideology; however, they claim the adoption of a Marxist ideology was not fully integrated into all aspects of their lives. It was very noticeable that women who had been active in socialist and communist parties during the struggles for liberation and independence

might not have adopted this ideology wholeheartedly. Today we see distinctions among the women who, at one point in time, fought together in the same trenches. The overarching cover of Arab nationalism made it possible for them to avoid more serious discussions about the differences in their ideologies. Um Fadi and Inaya, for example, strongly believe in the necessity of civil laws and separation of state and religion, while Um Ahmed and other women in JTMK are more intimately connected to religion and see no contradiction in religion-based laws. Based on the current ideologies of the interviewees, I make a distinction of two analytical categories, *al-'Ilmāniyyat*, the self-identified secularists with a variety of religious identification and belief systems, and *al-Khayriyyat*, who focus on volunteer/charity work and have mixed viewpoints on self-growth or responsibility toward fellow citizens. Of the six women I interviewed, four (Inaya, Sister Noon, Um Fadi, and Hajji Hala) were self-proclaimed secularists, and two (Um Ahmad and Um Adel) were under the *Khayriyyat* category. I also observed and interacted with numerous other women during the Lebanese Women's Council meeting and at other associations' meetings and events.

#### *al-'Ilmāniyyat*

Many of the women I interviewed believe strongly in the right and need of women to work outside their homes, within a context of equality to men as human beings. They feel that in order to achieve equality, women must engage equally in paid labor and demand respect and access to the "public sphere" of employment. They also believe in the inevitability of the class struggle, arguing along with Engles that women in the world of the employed will be more aware of the conditions of their exploitation and thus more class conscious. This leads my interviewees to believe that a woman's work inside the household, her role as a housewife, is of little value. Unpaid labor within the household then becomes an obstacle to be overcome.

If these activists do not derive their values from household work, do they still perceive "motherhood" as the ultimate role for women in society? According to my interviews, *al-'Ilmāniyyat* women see motherhood as important and recognize it as an available and legitimate avenue in society. However, their early political involvement in civil society shaped an alternative vision of the role of women.

Um Fadi and Inaya, who joined the Ba'ath party in their teens, hold strongly to leftist ideology and secular beliefs. Leftists in Lebanon believe that sectarianism was one of the plagues of their society that had allowed foreign forces to impact local decisions, conflicts, and wars (Sharif 1978; Farsoun 1976, 1978; Cultural Council for South Lebanon 1979, 1981). Um Fadi and Inaya strongly believe that secularism is the way of civil society and state governance and have worked to achieve that. Even today, after having left the party, Um Fadi and Inaya still adhere to these principles and work toward achieving secular laws/civil laws in all matters (not only marriage but for all Personal Status Codes). They are both university graduates, having attended Lebanese University in the late 1950s and early 60s, and they have focused on family life as well as their careers. Inaya, currently retired, was a teacher in public schools for over forty years. Um Fadi has just retired from a career in the real estate department in city hall. Their political activism was diverse and controversial—distributing fliers and pamphlets to stores and homes at night, away from the eye of the police, leading demonstrations and rallies, organizing lectures and workshops, and being imprisoned (Zaatari 2003). It is important to note that, at this juncture, they acted in defiance of their fathers' authority to follow their political convictions. I argue that it was the cover of nationalism that made their activities, mostly their political activism, possible. It was not, of course, the only qualification for their activity. Perhaps the repercussions of their actions would not have been tolerated by their parents had they been oriented toward other issues. They describe their fathers as patriarchal men who cared about their families yet were aloof and strict. It is hard to imagine that their fathers would have accepted these transgressions had the reasons not been Arab nationalism.

These women's lives show there is an available arena for women's activism in South Lebanon besides motherhood. They have transgressed the domain of the domestic, not just as mothers of society but as nationalists (I am not arguing that they were mothers of nationalists but that they themselves were nationalists). The historical moment was ready for an activism focused on social justice and nationalism. Women's issues (as in rights, legal and customary) were not debated or considered in terms of party decision making and power. Um Fadi recollected that they mostly obeyed orders. They discussed things, but if the rank-and-file (both men and women) had objections to some issues, they were not



always taken into consideration. Women rarely made it out of rank-and-file and into more national or regional leadership positions. The hierarchical structure of the party, according to both Inaya and Um Fadi, did not subordinate women alone but affected all men and women within it. Even so, because Inaya and Um Fadi disagreed strongly with some party actions, they eventually left. Even though Um Fadi was elected for leadership to the university branch of the party, there was a glass ceiling for women's participation. At the same time, Inaya visited women in different areas of the country to talk about women's equality. Thus, the beliefs in women's equality were enacted and practiced by the women activists themselves (like education, jobs, the right to vote, etc). Inaya added:

In terms of politics, I felt that at the beginning we were working mainly to make a point that we are here, but we did not necessarily play an effective role. I did not feel like we changed much, but we were a phenomenon (me and those who were involved politically along with me) or a model in a way to be followed. We broke many traditions like not wearing the *ḥijāb*, studying in school, going out, and participating with men in trips and clubs, entertaining male friends in our houses, attending college, discussion, and coming home late.

The actions they took on behalf of nationalism in the “public” space changed that space and their role in it. It allowed them later on to negotiate better with their fathers regarding their marriage and life choices. Those initial transgressions on behalf of Arab nationalism transformed into transgressions in their roles as women in their families and society.

Um Fadi's father forced her to wear the *ḥijāb* and forbade listening to music in the house and playing outside. He valued education but was strict and conservative. Her father, nonetheless, accepted numerous transgressions to his authority because he “deep down believed” in the cause of Arab nationalism and in the Palestinian struggle. Um Fadi often saw her father greatly interested in what Nasser (a leader of Arab nationalism) had to say and that he was deeply saddened by his death. Inaya's father insisted that his daughters and son be home and out of sight when he came home from work. A loving but strict father, he strongly believed in “the family” and spent time with them instead of going to the coffee-house like most other men. At the same time, he insisted his daughters learn the Qur'an by heart and dress and behave properly, and he was a

spiritual father who did not believe in having his authority undermined. He agreed with his daughter's nationalism though he disagreed with her Marxist beliefs. At the same time, both fathers were "traditional" in their belief systems. When Inaya was arrested, her father overlooked it, and when Um Fadi defied her father and went to a demonstration, he accepted it. The practice of defiance reconfigured the relationship between and the subjectivity of father and daughter to allow for further transgressions.

Both Um Fadi and Inaya acknowledge today that society values motherhood as the ultimate role of women. Their desire to practice their belief that a woman's value should not be tied to mothering therefore comes in conflict with the incessant motherhood discourses enacted by friends, relatives, neighbors, and the media. As a result, they send conflicted messages to their own daughters. Both women have daughters who are independent financially and who have embarked on a journey focused on their desires and needs as encouraged by their mothers. Yet, as relational subjects (Joseph 1993, 1994) the daughters' desires and needs also include to varying degrees their parents' desires, needs, and expectations. The daughters heard messages of "you can do anything you want to do" and "wear some makeup, fix your hair." The first set of comments encouraged their careers, their life outside the boundaries of motherhood, while the second focused on appearance and usually translated to "finding a husband." The mothers' desires for a "good" life for their daughters suffered from the internal fear that if their daughters lived too far outside the boundaries, they might suffer social consequences.<sup>7</sup> The mothers knew all too well that life outside marriage is not highly desirable in Lebanon, as there is a lot of pressure on both men and women to get married and form a family. Laurie King-Irani (2000) argues that "young people in most Middle Eastern societies are not considered to be truly adult until they have completed the important rites of passage of marriage and parenthood" (270).

On the role of women in society, Um Fadi stated, "A woman must have an effective role. She should never live like she is nobody or unimportant. The least she can do is raise a good family, to give the world children that are armed with knowledge, morals, and akhlāq." Motherhood is, then, a common denominator for women, one valued by their society. Other secular women I interviewed (those married with children) valued

their motherhood roles but did not necessarily subscribe to the notion that a woman's role should be first and foremost devoted to her family and her children. These women (married and single) strongly believed in the "human being" and his/her role in society.

For example, Sister Noon, who was born to a small family in a rural town, went to boarding school in the city and faced early stereotyping because she was from a rural area. Her involvement in organizational work was connected to her calling as a nun and to the civil war in Beirut. She was and still is extremely affected by what is happening to Palestinians and continues to work for social justice issues. When asked about the role of women in society, Sister Noon responded:

The role in society is available for the human being, regardless of whether they are men or women. Anybody can reach this role depending on his or her own capabilities. It is my wish that women do take their role because they will not be given that role. As a woman, you must impose yourself by your qualifications and not by requesting or asking for your right. What seems to continue to hold us back here is the emphasis on family names and patron-client network [*maḥsūbiyyat*], religious sects, and political authorities. There are a lot of highly qualified women and still we only have three women in parliament (and they arrive there on the shoulders of their men, husbands, and brothers). How is this possible? Our society is so much more than this. As long as we continue to have a sectarian electoral law, we will never achieve anything. Women need to be sure and confident in their personalities and in the people they know.

We see here the contradictory messages within the political/familial/religious structure of Lebanon and in the relationship between the citizen and the state and his or her family. The 'Ilmāniyyat are grappling with these issues, trying to walk a fine line between individual and community, family and civil society.

Hajji Hala, who remained single, was born into an upper middle-class family that strongly valued education. She studied in Egypt and ended up working as a teacher. Her activism intensified during the civil war, when she worked on national and women's issues. After working with several women's organizations, she resigned from women's associational work because in her opinion it was not an avenue for social change. About the role of women in society, Hajji Hala said:

First of all, her role is to realize her importance in society. In the Arab world in general and in Lebanon and Saida in particular, the woman does not understand that she has a true value, that her existence is valuable, and she does not know the meaning of her existence. Thus, she becomes always a follower. She pays attention to what is the latest in terms of fashion and cloth but does not do the same in terms of technology, studies, and research. She always places her clothing first over developing her knowledge. Second of all, there is a need for women's work to develop and mature her personality. This is not only in the economic/financial sense but also for the purpose of *istiqlāliyyat al-dhāt* [personal independence]. The "independence of herself" is important and is sometimes lost. All this so she can appreciate herself and be a trustworthy person towards herself.

This view of women seems to coincide on some level with Western discussions of rights and equality. The language of human rights is clearly discernible and is indicative of a particular ideological framework that governs how women and men are viewed. At the same time, as subjects of the Lebanese state and society, the 'ilmāniyyat's vision of rights is different, as it stems from a different self. Joseph (1993, 1994, 1997, 1999) has argued that in Lebanese society, the concept of the self is one of connectivity and relationality, clearly distinct from the "bounded, autonomous, and separate self" of Western liberal thought. As Joseph (1999c) argues, "Connectivity exists side by side with individualism in the same culture and perhaps even in the same person. These are not oppositional polarities. They often partake of each other, being applied situationally or at times leading to tensions within and between persons" (189).

The secularist women I interviewed are impacted by Western schools of thought and have participated in international conferences, yet they are also grounded in local cultures and histories. They do not hide the fact that they have read and were affected by Western theorists and writers like Marx, although they also have read local and Third World writers. Inaya read Françoise Sagan and Nawal al-Saadawi, one of the leading Arab feminist writers. Sister Noon reads mostly political and social analysis and recently has been following discussions on globalization, but she also reads Arabic poetry with fervor.

Sister Noon told me that expertise from the West is welcome if it comes in the right package. "You shouldn't forget your identity when you

leave this place, and only then will you be able to give better. Remember that you go to America or France to gain some technologies and not to change your identity.” These women have to work through and continuously engage their ideas, their practices, and their everyday realities. Borrowing from Shahnaz Khan (1998), these women have to negotiate the spaces in which they exist, be it the society, household, or their own minds. They understand the importance of the culture of motherhood in their society yet value the focus on the human being and her worth and value as a human being. They act to “empower women” to work, be independent, and have self-respect. In so doing, they reject Western hegemony, and thus they have to grapple with issues that sometimes are paradoxical and other times harmonious.

#### Al-Khayriyyat

The Charitable Women's Progress Association (Jam'iyat Taqādum al-Mar'a al-Khayriyya) (JTMK) is an organization that focuses on the care of motherhood and childhood in South Lebanon. This organization was created by working women from middle-class families who had been active in national struggles and wanted to focus on their families and immediate surroundings. Realizing that political parties were not fulfilling citizens' needs and that women needed assistance as working mothers in a relatively rural area where the government had not provided any services for years, the founders of JTMK felt the need for an organization where they could be the decision makers, planners, and executors of projects arising from people's needs. They saw children as the future of the society, and as such it was necessary to target their needs in a country torn by war. As stated on page seven of the JTMK brochure, “Since a mother has always been the base in forming a good family, and a society has always been a natural result of groups of harmonious families; also since a child is the fruit of these reactions, one of our main concerns was the mother and the child.” Their aim is to prepare women to be “good” mothers who produce “successful” children for society. However, they also provide social services for those in need in the Southern region, although their focus has been on women and children as the most disadvantaged. During times of crisis and conflict, JTMK also performs direct and needed emergency aid by providing food, shelter, and medical assistance.

The director Um Ahmad indicated that women have a lot of

opportunities and motivations to perform important roles in society: “I believe that the most suitable role in terms of a profession for a woman is teaching. I believe that this profession suits a woman’s needs perfectly because it leaves adequate time for her family and her children.” According to Um Ahmad, even those who might not get married would still act in one capacity or another as mothers to other children or as aides to mothers.<sup>8</sup> In Um Ahmad’s world view, it was important that a woman receive an education and that she work, yet life outside marriage was not recommended.

Zahia, another board member of JTMK, said, “The woman’s role always starts with the children, in the socialization of the children. She creates another human being, and so the household is the most important thing, and the mother’s role in it is the most important role.” She added, “The mother is the most important figure in the household and in the rearing of the children. The father/man is an important *helper* [italics added], but the mother is the basis.” Whereas Zahia perceived the mother as the key element of the household and of the socialization of the children, this did not mean that she had to perform all household chores. She believed that Islam talks about partnership in marriage and as such mothers should not teach their daughters to do all the work in the house. Instead, she added, “According to Islam, household chores are not necessarily the woman’s responsibility, but society has imposed these roles on the woman. The boy and the girl should both understand that they have similar duties to perform and that our religion says so.”

Um Adel, the housewife from Saida, has raised her daughters to value work as a needed asset but prioritizes family and household chores.

When her children are little, the most important thing is bringing them up. I do not think that this contradicts with having a paying job as well... Even if a woman hires a maid in the house, she shouldn’t rely on the maid to deal with and tutor her kids. The maid can do household chores but not raise the kids. A mother has influence and opinion on her children’s lives... When her children are old enough and she does not have to play as essential a role in their lives, then I believe she should give her time to serving people because there are many people who need help. Our society is big and requires a lot of different kinds of help, financial and otherwise... So in her family, the woman has the most important role to play.

After one is finished with duties toward family and kids are all grownups, then I cannot imagine life just doing visitations and watching TV—for the most part this is useless.

One of the ways in which the Khayriyyat justify focusing on women's literacy, vocational training, and general educational training is their responsibility for rearing a new generation. Yet these women are also strong supporters of women's work as a way to achieve financial independence and self-confidence. As Zahia said, "Financial independence gives a woman the support she needs to do what she wants." The Khayriyyat are accepting of the culture of motherhood, but they have learned through experience about the dangers of relying on the benevolence of a husband, especially in families with low socioeconomic status. Having witnessed numerous problems through observing and interacting with the families of the students they teach in their schools or in the projects they plan, they thus stress the importance of financial security. They see work for rural women as a way to increase the family income, alleviate poverty, and gain more power in the structure of decision making inside their households. Unlike the 'Ilmāniyyat, who view work as a vehicle for self-fulfillment and personal realization, the Khayriyyat focus on the security aspect. Work for the Khayriyyat is optional; it is not a desire.

## DISCUSSION

It is possible to argue that, in South Lebanon, the underlying assumption of women's participation in civil society and political life is always that of a nurturing mother. Lebanon, like many other Arab countries, takes family as its focus, as the center stage and the main unit of analysis. Even though the Lebanese might talk about the individual, legislation revolves around a particular idea of the family. The nation/state also imagines a particular kind of family and household (Joseph 1994, 1997; Brown 1995), a patriarchal structure with a male breadwinner and a domestic housewife/mother.

Several scholars (Collier et al. 1997; D'Emilio 1997; Hatem 1986) have discussed the shifts in family formations and identities that arise from changes in the economic and political structure of society. Similarly, the meaning of motherhood also shifts with various changes in the

social, political, and economic context of a particular local. For example, in Jean Said Makdisi's (1999) narrative of her mother, her grandmother, and herself, the shifts in the meanings of the domestic become clear. She explains that for her mother and grandmother in Palestine, "the giving, nurturing function of women in the house was a form of power, perhaps the most relentless form of power. Through the self-sacrificing love of women, men were appropriated together with all their functions" (44). The domestic world is also one of pleasure—to be able to nurture and care for children and family members provides women with worth and a sense of achievement. Makdisi attributes this in part to the missionaries and the Victorian attitudes of domesticating the women they brought with them: "The aim was never to 'liberate' the girls but to domesticate them, to tame them into becoming 'better' wives and mothers in the Victorian manner" (49). In this particular case, Makdisi argues that this actually led to further removal of women from the public realm and from the political life of their community. In this context, then, the culture of motherhood acts to distance women from political life. At the same time, Hassim (1993) stresses that even though the shape and policy may shift, change, and be deployed into the political, women are never deployed into decision-making positions: "It is a notion which reinforces women's subordination within the family by focusing on propping up existing relationships, and within political organizations by marginalizing them from decision-making as they are defined out of the mainstream of politics" (18).

In the Arab World, however, women nationalists have successfully deployed those images of motherhood. Speaking of Egypt, Baron (2005) indicates that:

Delivering petitions to foreign legations became a central part of the ritual of elite women's protests. The texts reveal that these women conceptualized Egyptian women as a group and claimed to speak for the female half of the political community... Women demonstrating in 1919 also deployed kinship idioms (111). By presenting themselves as "mothers of the nation" or other female relations, they strengthened the notion that the nation was a family, and they used their moral authority to dramatize Egypt's situation (112).

She discusses how Safiyya Zaghlul, Sa'd Zaghlul's wife, used this notion and the title by which she came to be known as the mother of



Egyptians, "*Umm al-Misriyyīn*." "Women nationalists often spoke in a maternal voice, and like their male compatriots, adopted family metaphors and kinship idioms. This rhetoric reached its fullest flowering in Egypt in the interwar years with the creation of a national mother" (135). Baron argues that Safiyya Zaghlul planned and controlled her public image. "She manipulated maternal symbolism to carve out a political role for herself" (135-6). As such, other nationalist women were able to play an important, though less recorded, role in the imagining of the nation. Although some friction existed between the women nationalists and male leadership on issues of women's involvement, nationalist women continued to deploy their motherhood roles in their political activism. Regardless of their success in ensuring full citizenship after independence, these women carved a space for themselves in the public and political realms.

In terms of Lebanon, Suad Joseph (1994) has argued that especially during the war years the Lebanese state was weak and thus unable to provide services for its citizens directly. Kinship relations overlaid political and religious relations that aided people in procuring resources. People came to have rights not necessarily as citizens but because they established and fostered relationships with others in authority or key positions (Joseph 1994). People's participation in the public/civil society life was affected by their family's social economic/political location in it.

Today in Lebanon, motherhood often comes to embody notions of women's citizenship. The citizen most often imagined in the laws of the nation/state may be male, but legislation also encompasses families, including women and their duties and responsibilities as members of a society. The Islamist women I interviewed in Lebanon have learned to capitalize on this assumption by associating it more strongly with religious texts and ideology. I do not by any means suggest here that they are manipulative or that this valorization of motherhood is simply a strategy to gain access. On the contrary, these convictions are very deeply held and entrenched in the psyches of both women and men. Their religious ideology accompanied by the cultural emphasis on motherhood strongly impacts their actions, which allows a certain level of freedom. Dressed in a way that shows she is a member or at least an affiliate of Hizbullah, a woman can walk the streets without being harassed and interact freely with men without fear of parents or society's reprimands.<sup>9</sup> Indeed,

women members of Hizbullah operated Manar TV on March 8, 2001, International Women's Day. The significance and symbolism of this move notwithstanding, the Hizbullah women and men I interviewed adhered to an Islamic ideology viewing women as equal participants in society. For them, equality did not translate into sameness. "God created both different and attributed different characteristics to each that would enable them to play a specific role in society," Um Hassan stated. They saw their roles as complementary rather than antagonistic, and women's most important role was to "make men" as a mother.

On the contrary, the 'Ilmāniyyat women interviewed saw themselves as women and mothers but not only as mothers. The 'Ilmāniyyat's contribution to the political struggle of liberation of Lebanon and elsewhere was not tied into its discursive presentation to motherhood. For example, both Um Fadi and Inaya felt they were contributing to the social transformation of their society as citizens of the "Arab Nation." They did not view their role as one nurturing other male nationalists or as the "mothers" and caretakers of their society but as political subjects on equal footing with men and demanding a more just future. Unlike Safiyya Zaghlul, the women I interviewed were members of the rank-and-file in relation to the larger picture, yet they were leaders in their own communities and cities.

On the other hand, al-Khayriyyat prioritized the role of motherhood as one of being dictated by God and tradition. However, the subjectivity resulting from their religiosity is different than that of the Islamists. Al-Khayriyyat's religiosity was not necessarily a political one, as it was not aimed at creating an alternative Islamic society or nation. Instead, their religiosity focused on how one treats other people and on the practice of charity. For example, Um Ahmad, an ex-left party member, wears the *ḥijāb* but dislikes the new Islamists. She feels they are too strict and that the society they imagine seems to have existed only in their imagination and has no historical significance. Um Ahmad's belief is about doing good toward others as much as it is about praying to God.

Among all three groups, the norm is for motherhood, and this emphasis on motherhood (and fatherhood) is in line with the emphasis on family in Lebanon. The more one relies on family members for jobs, security, resources, and self-worth, the more one will value and appreciate family. The weakness of the state and the continued emphasis on the

family encourages a culture of motherhood in practice and theory. As such, women activists from diverse groups in South Lebanon can easily justify transgressing culturally or religiously accepted boundaries by using the culture of motherhood to their benefit. The 'Ilmāniyyat may not publicly deploy the culture of motherhood like the woman nationalists of 1919 Egypt; however, they easily recognize the importance of such an idiom and a space for women's activism. The culture of motherhood thus provides a legitimate space for women's civil participation, as in the process it transforms the women themselves and the public space.

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### NOTES

1. It is difficult to affirm that in the past eight decades there were continuous periods of peace in South Lebanon. However, conflict escalates and recedes, allowing for moments of peace.

2. I am using the term "nation" here to denote several possibilities or imaginings of the nation. For some, the nation may be the Arab nation, and for others it can be the Muslim nation or the *umma*.

3. According to Sharif, the French diverted trade routes, forcing all interaction to be exclusively with Damascus. Therefore, Saida's and Sur's ports lost their roles, and the South started losing its importance.

4. Even as recently as 1999, women constituted a majority in more than fifty percent of mixed organizations (with broader social justice concerns) of the South.

5. I use the two terms interchangeably throughout the article. For entities that do not have some kind of formalized structure, I use the term "collectivity."

6. Abu Hurairah said, A man came to the Messenger of Allah, peace and bless-

ings of Allah be on him, and said, O Messenger of Allah! Who has the greatest right that I should keep company with him with goodness? He said, Thy mother. He said, Who then? He said, Thy mother. He said, Who then? He said, Thy mother. He said, Who then? He said, Then thy father (B.78:2) (Ali 1978:373-4).

7. In a culture in which family is valued over and above the person, identity is defined in familial terms, and kin idioms and relationships pervade public and private spheres, connective relationships may not only be functional but necessary for successful social existence (Joseph 1999c:189).

8. Since my interaction with Um Ahmad dates back to many years ago, she always felt at liberty to tell me that I should get married. She valued my work, seriousness, and education, but I should get married because life otherwise would not be complete. Um Ahmad, a working woman herself, believes women should work, but their work should not be at the expense of their families. She acknowledges the accomplishments of many women who are doctors and engineers but sees them as tired because their work takes up a lot of their time and makes them unable to give their families their required share. Her views may be biased due to the fact that she had a long career in teaching, as have many of the women in her association, her daughter, and two daughters-in-law, but teaching is one of the most acceptable professions for women in Lebanon and elsewhere. Unmarried women fulfill their role as mothers to their students, and teaching is perceived to be an extension of a woman's maternal role outside the house.

9. The role of the *ḥijāb* or some kind of a "proper" or acceptable form of Islamic dress in allowing women more freedom to venture outside their houses and into work and meetings in various Muslim countries has been documented by many authors, including Mervat Hatem, Leila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood, and Fatima Mernissi (in Egypt and Morocco).

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