

A Vision of Visibility – The Politics of Women's Rights and International Aid in Lebanon

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Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DFID	Department for International Development of the United Kingdom
LECORVAW	Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Woman
INGO	International Non-Profit Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NCLW	National Committee for Lebanese Women
NGO	Non-Profit Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OECD-DAC	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PCA	Progress Changes and Action
RDFL	Le Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises
RIPE	Research Institute for Peace and Empowerment
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programm
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WEF	World Economic Forum

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A Vision of Visibility: The Politics of Women's Rights and International Aid in Lebanon

The difference between freedom and submission is agency.

—Mashrou' Leila

1. Introduction

// It began with my first encounter with Rima, at the offices of Progress Changes and Action (PCA).¹ I was going to intern at PCA for four months, right after arriving in Beirut for my fieldwork in April 2016. She was waiting for me in her office—a two-room apartment full of floor-to-ceiling shelves stuffed with documents. Rima was sitting at her desk, typing, and staring at her computer screen—an image I would see every day for the next four months. When I entered, she looked up, smiled mischievously, and walked towards me. Checking her watch, she asked, "You're from Switzerland, right? Why did you want to come to Lebanon and work on development in a Lebanese NGO when you have banks in Switzerland to work in?" I explained to Rima that I hadn't trained as a banker, nor was I interested in banking, economics, or finance. I'm a researcher, I told her, and it is still typical for anthropologists to do fieldwork abroad. "Ah, I see," Rima said, obviously not impressed by my life decisions. "However, you will be learning a lot. It would help if you keep in mind that here we are living in a developing country. It is not

¹ This organization is anonymized and referred to by a pseudonym throughout this dissertation. Apart from existing campaigns and commonly known organizations, all agencies, institutions, and employees are anonymized. Further detail regarding the kind of anonymization is provided in the chapter on method.

Europe, even though we are dependent on Europe in many ways."
//²

This vignette introduces the focus of my dissertation: the role of local NGOs and grassroots women's rights activism in Lebanon. My research examines the intricate relationship between NGO activities and women's rights activism, exploring how they influence and interact with each other within a complex landscape shaped by institutionalization, diversity, and historical and political contexts. Furthermore, I will investigate the interplay between the affective and moral economies of donors and the beneficiaries of their generosity, highlighting how financial support shapes the agenda of both NGOs and activists. This research emphasizes that NGO activism targets legal reforms and practical initiatives aimed at advancing women's rights through various services such as legal counseling, workshops, and advocacy events.

This dissertation demonstrates that women's rights organizations in Lebanon play a crucial role in the practice of international human rights discourse through local adaptation and networking. It underscores that the marginalization of human rights advocacy, particularly women's rights, in international aid projects not only reduces the visibility of these issues but also constrains the agency of local organizations and grassroots activism. A key contribution of this work is the assertion that integrating local voices and perspectives into international human rights standards, as well as into concrete policies and interventions within international development and humanitarian projects, is essential for generating transformative impact.

The structure of this chapter is organized as follows: It begins with an overview of the theoretical framework guiding this research, including the conceptual orientation, the current state of research featuring the two most significant theoretical approaches, and the identification of the existing research gap. Next, the main arguments and key contributions of this work are presented. Building upon this foundation, the newly developed conceptual framework is introduced, with a focus on visions, visibility, and projections. The chapter then provides a brief geographical and historical contextualization of Lebanon. Finally, an outline

² Extract from field notes, 04.04. 2016.

of the individual chapters follows. My fieldwork, conducted primarily in Beirut in 2016 and 2017, focused on women's NGOs, international organizations, and grassroots activist groups³.

The focus of this work is practice-oriented and positioned within the Theory and Practice debate: NGOs operate locally, and women's work is carried out in accordance with the specific conditions and needs of the community. Action is guided by everyday realities, which in turn shape the ways in which work is conducted and implemented.

This praxis-based approach emphasizes how women negotiate and shape institutional structures through their daily life experiences and social interactions. The research's analytical procedure examines the structures and processes through which women's collective actions influence, and are influenced by, their social context. I investigate how the actions of women's NGOs and women's rights activists are shaped by, and in turn shape, these contexts. Central to this analysis is the agency of all involved actors—including international organizations, local women's NGOs, and grassroots activists—and where and how structures of agency are produced and reproduced.

This approach draws on practice theory, which highlights processes of adaptation, resistance, and acceptance of structures manifesting in everyday actions, interactions, and practices. Key practitioners of this perspective include Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]; 1998), Anthony Giddens (1984), Michel Foucault (1977), and Sherry Ortner (1984; 2006). By focusing on daily practices, the research aims to understand how structural realities are reproduced and challenged from the ground up, reflecting the dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structures.

This derivation provides the foundation for why the perspective on the structures and organization of women's rights activism is such an essential theoretical basis. In the following, I illustrate how my research seeks to incorporate these aspects into its analytical and practical framework. The goal is to draw on pioneering insights in the academic examination of power structures and relationships. It becomes clear that these are social and legal practices; law is not only enacted in formal or judicial settings but is also co-produced through the everyday actions and strategies of women's organizations. Women's work and activism are thus not solely focused on legal reforms or rights. Instead, legal transformations should be understood as societal processes supported by the visions of women's NGOs. Law, in this sense, is

³ For more information on field research access and a discussion of knowledge production and the field work see the second chapter on methods.

practiced—it is made in everyday life. My work demonstrates how diverse and complex these practices performed by women's NGOs are in their daily work. Special emphasis is placed on understanding this within the specific Lebanese context, with its particular legal framework and political landscape. The multiple perspectives that my research introduces, along with the analysis of specific campaigns within the international aid context, contribute new insights into how women's NGOs negotiate and shape women's rights locally.

The overarching research question guiding this thesis is therefore:

How do women's rights NGOs work on legal transformations in Lebanon?

NGOS AS ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

I employ NGOs as an analytical category because, due to their organizational characteristics, they convey, mediate, and influence politics and law. However, I have already demonstrated that using the term "NGO" as a fixed label for organizations operating in this field obscures the complexity of their outward relations and internal organizational structures. NGOs, in both structure and function, are agents. They translate, adapt, and question notions of women's rights as well as the universality of human rights and morality. Furthermore, as brokers and mediators (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Koster 2014; Lewis and Mosse 2006), NGOs develop bureaucracies and structures that resemble those of states. This is another reason why I choose to analyze NGOs as a category.

The organization of NGOs is inherently hybrid: while their bureaucratic elements, comparable to state institutions, are manageable and assessable, their small size and non-governmental status allow them to remain flexible and dynamic (Scott and Meyer 1994; Lewis 2003).

Many actors—including foreign states—see NGOs as targets for governance and control. NGOs are also frequently criticized for serving their own interests (Lister 2003). I observed these critiques firsthand during my ethnographic research, where various actors within the international aid industry described NGO structures and roles as externally guided and controlled.

Nevertheless, NGOs often assume functions that are typically filled by governments: They provide services, sometimes replacing state offerings, or developing their own. They take

care of basic needs—such as in health, education, or economic sectors affecting daily life. They also offer counseling and support in bureaucratic, administrative, and financial matters. The work of NGO projects usually involves bureaucratic structures with evaluation, auditing, and accountability measures (Kipnis 2008; Merry & Conley 2011; Rottenburg et al. 2015; Shore 2008; Strathern 2000).

Based on these theoretical insights, I view the work of NGOs not merely as the professional performance of bureaucratic tasks, but primarily as a form of social change.

In Chapter 5, I compare the process by which NGOs build visibility to the growth of an organ within the human body—highlighting the diversity, differences, and documentation of grassroots activism. NGOs as organizations symbolize women's rights activism: their activities are embodied expressions of their visions and serve as the basis of their visibility.

Beneath their work lies a social obligation and a political commitment driven by a desire for societal transformation. This moral effort extends beyond the norms, rules, and values common in development and humanitarian work.

The people working within NGOs rarely adopt a single role. Instead, they operate across multiple levels, embodying hybrid and cosmopolitan identities that vary depending on the social context and the other actors present—such as activists, experts, female staff, leaders, mothers, or women. This multiplicity underscores my understanding of NGOs as multifaceted actors fundamentally motivated by the pursuit of social change.

1.2 Theoretical Approach

Law as a Mediation and Travelling Object

This section provides the theoretical foundation for understanding law's multifaceted role within women's rights activism and international aid policy. It explores three interconnected concepts: first, law as a "travelling object" or "travelling model", which signifies how legal norms and ideas move across different geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Çubukçu 2018; Rottenburg 2009). Second, law is conceptualized as a process of social mediation—an ongoing negotiation among diverse actors and levels, from international to local, with NGOs acting as brokers (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Merry and Canfield 2015). Third,

law serves as an empowering means to visibly articulate, strengthen, and promote women's rights as universal human rights.⁴

Departing from Law as Social Process

After presenting the various theoretical conceptions of law as a transcultural, mediative, and empowerment-enhancing element, it becomes necessary to look at the foundational anthropological discipline that has empirically studied these aspects. Since its inception, legal anthropology has examined law as a social practice—particularly in contexts where formal institutions are absent or differently used. Since its inception, the anthropology of law has been used to explore disputes in fields where (apparently) formal legal institutions and codified law have not existed, as well as within institutional sites where law has been (re-)produced and transformed. Two pioneering legal anthropologists, Sally Falk Moore and Laura Nader, examined law through empirical research and theorized that it functions both as a legal and social process, closely connected to power and control (Moore 1973; Nader 1997). Lawrence Rosen, an American anthropologist, explored how law absorbs normativity, values, and normative orders (Rosen 1989). For Rosen, law and culture gradually become entangled.

Sally Engle Merry and Matthew Canfield analyze law as a form of normative ordering that encompasses rules and processes (Merry and Canfield 2015). They argue that law, regarded as a proven language of rights, has demonstrated itself as a robust framework for social justice movements, particularly since the Cold War era (Merry and Canfield 2015: 536). Anthropologist and legal scholar Franz Benda-Beckmann (2002) emphasizes that little development policy and implementation occur without involving law. He describes law as "the desired situation projected into the future" (2002: 129). Benda-Beckmann states that experts continuously reproduce development goals, framing them as authoritative categories, knowledge productions, and working environments. He further explains that motives related to development often conceal underlying power strategies, which are translated under the guise of progress and the improvement of living conditions.

Legal scholar Ayça Çubukçu defines law as a form of mediation (2018: 100). She additionally considers legal power to be mediated through "travelling objects." These travelling objects are conceptualized as translated elements of global norms or international

⁴ Factors and conditions that allow such visibility and empowerment are discussed in the subsequent section on law as an empowering mean.

quality-of-life standards, which depend on specific geographical and cultural contexts (Behrends et al. 2014; Rottenburg et al. 2009). This perspective supports the view that law plays a mediating or arbitrating role between actors involved in law- and policymaking or resistance. This ethnographic research shows that, for women's rights activists, law functions as a means of visibility, allowing them to network on transnational and international levels and to participate in policy-making and legal transformation processes across international, transnational, and local spheres. The anthropological perspective on law as a social and cultural process provides the basis for understanding how legal norms operate globally and are translated locally. Within this framework, it is crucial to analyze the tensions between formal international law and the increasingly influential norms of soft law, which have gained prominence in recent decades.

Although international law concepts can operate as legally binding in cases of conventions, they need to have been ratified by each state. However, most international treaty bodies function as negotiators of soft law. Based on contract law, these negotiations translate soft law into guidelines for national and domestic law. Soft law, in contrast to hard law, includes guidelines, agreements, and declarations (of compliance). Its binding force is weaker and thus considered less enforceable. This perspective tends to overemphasize the binding nature of hard law and undervalue the power and strategies for implementing soft law. In reality, even treaties and declarations from international conferences, UN resolutions, and other agreements—once ratified or signed—can lead to changes in customary law and influence national legal practices. The power of soft law is especially relevant for countries in the Global South, as it often underpins the interpretation and development of international and customary law by affirming general principles (Boyle 2014).

Understanding how norms are negotiated and translated internationally offers insight into how societal issues, especially those related to gender, are increasingly being embedded within legal frameworks through judicialization. Judicialization transforms social issues into legal ones or embeds them within juridical theory surrounded by legal discourse. This process turns societal concerns into juridical questions, on which courts pass verdicts. Judicialization involves specialized knowledge, skills, and professions within the legal domain and relies on mediums—such as legal language and jurisprudence—to disseminate juridical concepts in spheres of negotiation and decision-making. In this empirical case, judicialization refers to how women become recognized as legal subjects and how women's issues are amplified into public

and political discourses, with women demanding equal treatment as men. The codification of women's rights in law raises awareness of potential inequalities, legal decisions, and the juridification process itself, establishing women's status as legal subjects. Beyond influencing legal and political debates, the law also serves as a tool to highlight women's lived experiences and social contexts, making these more visible—particularly through women's NGOs adopting a rights-based approach (Shapiro and Sweet 2002; Hirschl 2006, 2008; Couso et al. 2010).

Building on this theoretical framework, the concept of judicialization offers a crucial lens through which to examine how social issues are transformed into legal matters—often reshaping public discourse and political agendas. In this context, I will analyze, from an empirical perspective, how women's rights issues are increasingly being juridified, turning them into legal subjects and amplifying their visibility within legal and political spheres. Although this conceptual approach was developed in the broader theoretical introduction, the upcoming case study will demonstrate how judicialization functions in practice—how women's issues are brought into legal arenas, shaped by juridical discourses, and mobilized through legal procedures to demand equality and recognition. This analysis aims to uncover the processes and strategies at play in the specific context of women's rights activism, illustrating the broader significance of judicialization as a transformative force in gender politics.

While analyzing judicialization reveals how societal change occurs through legal procedures, it also opens up perspectives on how legal success stories in women's movements are used to challenge and transform societal power structures. This process is essential to understanding the role of law in the fight for equality and visibility, especially within transnational women's and human rights movements. Based on this understanding of international legal frameworks and discourses, it is important to consider the historical development of human rights. To fully grasp the contemporary landscape of women's rights activism and international law, it is important to trace the historical roots of the human rights discourse—its European origins, dissemination, and subsequent global adoption.

Law as an Empowering Means: Women's Rights Advocacy and Transnational Activism

Having explored the legal processes through which women's issues become visible and recognized, it is pertinent to examine how these legal transformations interact with and

reinforce transnational feminist movements and advocacy efforts. Since the 1990s, human rights have emerged as the most legitimate juridical and cultural tools for articulating women's claims. Political and human rights advocacy groups and activists often portray women and children as subjugated victims in need of rescue. Institutional agendas incorporate legal approaches under the banner of humanity (see Steiner et al. 2008). These agendas aim to reach an international audience that negotiates the politics of solidarity and internationalism. Despite some negative and narrowly focused associations with such narratives of human rights activism, Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2005) advocate for exploring research on advocacy beyond the liberal rights discourse and applying it more practically. In this context, legal scholar Abdullahi An-Na'im (2009) calls for an examination of the human rights approach and its theoretical capabilities. He supports a cross-cultural effort to define international standards of human rights.

While the discussion around human rights and their application in the global women's rights movement is complex, legal anthropology has also made important contributions to this area. It has, among other things, engaged with the cultural dimensions of law and human rights (Messer 1993; 1997; Cowan et al. 2000). Anthropologist Marc Goodale (2009; 2017) has been influential in shaping the discipline's debate on how anthropology approaches human rights in terms of cultural relativism, universality, and diversity (Goodale et al. 2006). From this, a perspective has emerged that examines legal practices within local contexts and analyzes how human rights or law are implemented and translated on the ground (Goodale and Merry 2007). Building on An-Na'im's line of thought, the next section provides a brief timeline of the origins and developments of the human rights discourse.

Human rights discourse has its origins in Western, particularly European ideas of individual rights, with roots dating back to the era of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Anthropologist Richard Wilson has described the way in which human rights and their discourse are promoted as "the archetypal language of democratic transition" (2001: 1). However, pioneering forms of human rights charters—established and maintained as the primary legal tools for advancing international human rights—existed earlier, in 18th-century France and the United States, and later in 19th-century Latin America (Armeline et al. 2015). Human rights gained prominence on the global stage—and began to influence international politics—after World War II. During this period, ideas about morality, ethics, and notions of humanity and humanitarian action evolved significantly.

The end of the Cold War further cemented the role of human rights discourse globally, especially in post-conflict and territorial politics driven by inter-state relations and interests. As inter-state hostilities eased, more peaceful negotiations gained prominence, shifting the focus of political activity towards intra-state issues. This shift brought greater attention to human rights not only as discourse but as concrete practice. Consequently, a culture of legislation and legal activism began to develop more widely from the 1990s onward, driven by several factors: the end of the Cold War, the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the increased presence of NGOs in post-conflict and peacebuilding initiatives (Barnett 2011). In this context, anthropologist Rema Hammami observed a rise in the professionalization of NGO politics and activism (Hammami 2000). Gender issues, particularly women's rights and human rights advocacy, have also been linked to what is known as governance feminism—a form of a universalist, feminist global political agenda. In fact, UN agencies institutionalized such feminism through their conferences in Mexico City, Vienna, and Beijing, which advanced the issue of violence against women from 1980 to 1990 (Hesford and Kozol 2005; Friedman 1995; UN 1996). To understand the current role of human rights discourse in influencing feminist movements, it is helpful to trace its historical origins and development since the Enlightenment.

As mentioned earlier, after the Cold War, activism addressing gender-based violence, violations, and neglect gained momentum. These efforts raised critical questions about state accountability and responsibility and positioned women's activism as a means to make political work more transparent. Many social scientists and anthropologists have critically engaged with human rights discourse, highlighting its dangers—such as the risks of universalism, individualism, and the legacies of colonialism and imperialism embedded within it (Grewal 1993; Dutt 1998). Prominent theorists and women's activist researchers, including Amrita Basu (2000; 2018), Sonia Alvarez (1999; 2009), Temma Kaplan (2000), and Tani Barlow (2004), have critiqued the reliance on a Western liberal framework and its secularization within human rights discourse and international development. They further question the underlying security agendas—often capitalist, neoliberal, globalized, racist, and oppressive—that frame much of the international discourse on human rights.

1.2.1 Gender in International Aid

Development projects aim to increase women's visibility. Often framed as part of gender equality and awareness-raising initiatives, women have become an influential target group in international development policymaking and legal reform. However, the realities of everyday life are often neglected in how women are modeled as a target group. Policymakers and analysts tend to understand women mainly as heterosexual women performing care work—or at least work related to family or childcare. In this context, it is also important to note that women-focused development projects often lack innovative knowledge and conceptual frameworks. The terms gender and development mainly reflect understanding and relationships between men and women, but with few distinctions, which is why Cornwall (2007) describes them as *buzzwords*. However, this orientation towards target groups is often based on outdated ideas about gender and social roles that need to be critically examined.

The lens through which women's roles in projects and their resulting policies is seen are old-fashioned. This perspective is also characterized by a rigid, normative view that considers the use and significance of social spaces from a classical perspective. They further rely on classic normative understandings of spaces where both men and women are situated (Razavi and Miller 1995: 41). However, the authors mentioned above pinpoint shifts in gender projects in development. Although the perspective on women in politics has changed during this development, critical voices are warning against the repression of feminist demands. Over the last few decades, however, an important change has taken place in development policy. They argue that a major shift happened from "women-specific projects to mainstreaming women/gender at the program and policy level. More significantly, from reliance on top-down planning to a growing emphasis on 'bottom-up' or 'participatory' development strategies signifying the growing politicization of the development agenda" (1995: 41). Alternatively, in the words of anthropologists Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal (2014: 2), "women are prime targets of neoliberal restructuring and development." Development agencies adopted the practice of gender mainstreaming as a technocratic category. At the same time, this development paved the way for a stronger institutional embedding of women's and gender issues. By examining the evolving landscape of international aid policy, we can observe the growing institutionalization and transfer of women's and gender issues to national responsibilities. In this way, the approach depoliticizes feminist arguments for equality

(Cornwall et al. 2007). The neoliberal governmentalization of empowerment can make political activism and transformation possible (Sharma 2008).

In the history of the internationalization of development and gender, the incorporation of both women's matters and women themselves coincide with the establishment of national commissions and commitments on women's rights (Kantola and Outhoorn 2007). These needed to be launched first in domestic contexts, allowing governments to show that they were keeping up with passed international conventions (Friedman 1995). This was a reaction to the consideration of women's rights as human rights and demands from women's activist spheres (UN 1996). It is, therefore, a "quasi-state response based on international law obligations and local claims (Schild 2000: 25)." In domestic legal apparatus, some women's movements actors were able to pressure governments to amend policies or pass laws dealing with family matters. Two primary foci were and are violence within family structures and family law itself (e.g., custody and divorce). This was achieved through awareness-raising (an educational undertaking, so to speak) and also within public debates. It marked an intention to break with the public/private dichotomy, which still exists as a Western conceptualization of public and private matters as well as the meanings of "public" and "private". Also, views on the concept of privacy have become more political, together with those on transparency and visibility.

Development theorist Ravi Kanbur, however, stated that such an interdisciplinary arena or sphere could only reduce the complexity to its standard and lowest denominator (Kanbur 2002; 2006). Kanbur further points out in his article that established economic approaches alone cannot capture events and processes around development and law in action. They require assistance from other disciplines to figure out what kind of power relations and actors are at stake (Kanbur 2002; 2006).

Gender theorist, Sally Haslanger (2012), connects structural domination and oppression to her analysis of gender. Haslanger offers what she calls a "focal analysis" of gender, according to which the core of gender is "the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate" (2012: 228). Haslanger's analysis of gender categories reveals that norms, identities, and symbols are gendered and reproduced in social relations. Sexual difference, therefore, seeks to make distinctions between groups that have complex and oppressive relationships with each other (2012: 229-230).

As already stated, Cornwall (2007) famously introduced the term buzzwords as part of her critical postmodernist view on development discourse and rhetoric. By "buzzwords", she means umbrella terms, ones which are considered meaningless or used as broadly as possible to maintain general consent and establish agreed-on meaning. This use of terms leads to a further problem. Cornwall refers particularly to buzzwords existing in the development sectors, such as development itself, empowerment, or gender. Another important characteristic of buzzwords is their malleability; their meaning depends largely on the setting or audience they are intended for. Buzzwords tied to power differentials are not unidirectional. However, they are located closer to those who are financially and politically more powerful in developmental affairs—donors, for example (Cornwall 2007). Such a concept can prevent the work of promoting and strengthening women's rights, is thus prevented, and used as a buzzword because it offers a surface for attack precisely because it is empty of content. These tendencies have led to the depoliticization of women's rights. Buzzwords are often old-fashioned and oversimplified concepts which are not any longer applicable in practice and do not represent the complex realities that projects attempt to highlight (Cornwall 2007). The use of buzzwords dilutes complex processes and procedures, subsuming them into a term which is general and intangible and can, therefore, also be misused with regard to market-oriented and political purposes and opportunities. This is precisely where the importance of ethnographic research becomes apparent, as it shows how terms take on different meanings in different contexts. The concept of this ethnographic research is relevant because it shows how such words are adopted and reproduced depending on their context and intended purpose. Such uses pose the problem that the content of the term becomes unclear and diluted, which can then damage the actual meaning.

This previous section critically examines how women's rights and gender issues in international aid have evolved in ways that often rely on outdated stereotypes and vague buzzwords like "empowerment" and "gender". While strategies such as mainstreaming increased visibility for women's issues, they also risk depoliticizing and oversimplifying complex realities. Ethnographic research is crucial to understand how these terms are used in different contexts, revealing their potential for misuse and the challenges for genuine women's rights advocacy.

In this thesis, incorporating feminist and regional literature is essential to addressing the unique cultural and social context of Lebanon. By engaging with these perspectives, I aim

to give voice to the experiences of local women, support their participation, and promote their empowerment. Furthermore, studying feminist and regional theories enables a critical reflection on power relations, gender dynamics, and colonial legacies in the Arab world. This broadens the discourse on women's rights in Lebanon, incorporating diverse, local, and critical viewpoints, which enhances understanding of the complexity of the issues. An intersectional and interdisciplinary approach is therefore vital to ensure that the research remains reflective, relevant, and nuanced. To understand the various forms of expression and contexts of feminist agency, it is necessary to consider the different cultural and religious frameworks.

1.2.2 Feminist Agency: Reaction to Othering and Cultures of Security

Feminist ethnography emerged as a branch of ethnographic research in the 1980s. Since then, it has been shaped continuously, gradually broadening into its own field of research. Feminist ethnography and academic disciplines had existed prior to this but were referred to by a different buzzword. The approach had also been less visible, acting simultaneously as its own sub-discipline. One of feminist ethnography's purposes is to reconceive the prevailing patterns in the distribution of roles to men and women. It therefore defines and creates conceptual frameworks for new identifies, belongings, or classification. The end of the Cold War—and therefore, the beginning of a new era of global order— Influenced narratives and the subjects of research explored within feminist ethnography. In addition to shifts in content, theoretical contributions and concepts have also been broadened and directed onto new paths.

Feminist theorist Saba Mahmood (2011) supports Abu Lughod's argument (2002) in favor of accepting women's freedom of choice even if the choices made do not conform to the shape of Western ideas and ideologies—especially international humanitarianism and secularism. Both, Mahmood and Abu Lughod call for a broader view of women in the Arab world, one that does not cast them as victims, incapable of independence or self-determined action. They also wish to overcome the assumption that "brown women need to be saved from brown men by white men." At this point, I want to put emphasis not only on the Muslim women's rights movement but also on the Arab one, as half of the Lebanese population is Christian.

Religious affiliation is one among many identity markers and can function as an individual identity in its own right. However, my aim is not to suggest that religious difference is the most defining feature of personal lives. Instead, my analysis adopts a cross-cultural and intersectional perspective. The research investigates religious belonging within the context of politics, focusing on how it is instrumentalized and institutionalized. These cultural contexts are often characterized by post-colonial conditions in which religion, tradition and modern resistance are intertwined.

Piety, agency, feminism: these three concepts go together. They do not need to be separated, much less considered mutually exclusive as Mahmood (2006) pointed out in her well-known work on the piety of women she interviewed in mosques in Egypt challenges imposed Western liberal views on the agency of women. One can be pious and have a modern, feminist agency which is adjusted to social norms and hierarchies, secular and otherwise (Mahmood 2006). Secularism, liberalism, and modernity are therefore not necessarily opposed to Islam. These ideologies also don't have to insist that agency must be secular and that women, especially Muslim ones, "need to be saved" by the West (and Western men in particular). Foreign policy developments related to security and peace— especially in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent racist scapegoating of Muslims for that attack—only reinforced that ideology. This forced theorists and scholars to intervene in growing debates, debunking and opposing, through analysis and case studies, generalized assumptions stereotypes about rigid and uniformed Muslim cultures and practices.

Within feminist discourse, there have been ongoing debates between different approaches and between Western/European and non-European/Global South perspectives. Palestinian American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) contributed significantly to the discourse with her well-known article *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* In it, Abu-Lughod criticizes the Western tendency to equate the status of women with modernity. She also challenges the notion that non-secular stances necessarily align with patriarchal structures and are solely associated with oppression or the essentialized, suppressive portrayal of women. These views are not new and were further reinforced by the events of 9/11.

Many feminists from the Global South, among them Moroccan anthropologist Fatima Mernissi (1987), Turkish anthropologist Deniz Kandiyoti (1991), and Lebanese anthropologist Suad Joseph (2008; 2012) opposed the attitudes of mainstream American and European

feminist scholars. In the 1990s, they had already fought against the mostly second-wave, liberal feminist perspective (Whelehan 1995; Shrager 1996) that veiled women are solely devoted to religion and men's authority and oppressed in general.⁵ Lebanese anthropologist Lara Deeb (2011) did her research on women in a Shia community on the southern outskirts of Beirut and the blurring of the public/private dichotomy in the women's practice of piety through public demonstration of religiosity, a political and empowering act of agency. Zakia Salime (2011), Leila Ahmed (2011), and Ellen McLarney (2015) have all done research which offers alternatives to secular-liberal views on the agency of women in non-Western societies. All these ethnographies share a common approach: they critically engage with feminist concepts within the contexts of religion, piety, and modernity. They demonstrate how oppositional categorizations can be redefined and reworked to establish a legacy that is both culturally rooted and compatible with modernity. These ethnographies reveal new entanglements, framing feminist values and actions as political acts that are simultaneously perceived as non-Western, secular, religiously motivated, and modern. In addition to these cultural narratives, intersectionality is also coming into focus: it makes it possible to link gender, sexuality, class, religion and other categories with one another.

Younger female scholars and their works increasingly deal with intersectional feminism, which questions sexuality from the perspective of gender categories (Sehlikoglu 2017; Mikdashi 2012) and thus brings queerness and homosexuality to the fore, as well as a reframing of intimacy and sexuality in general (Najmabadi 2005; Mekouar and Zaganianis 2018). Another branch of non-Western feminists looks at the political and activist dimensions of the agency of women's empowerment and education (Sukarieh 2014; Siddiqi 2009; Khoja-Moolji 2018). In my ethnographic research it becomes clear that agency must be understood above all as a reaction to changes and challenges in the global framework

Building on these theoretical approaches, I conceptualize 'agency' as the capacity to act and exercise power. I consider this as a particular, reactive form of agency, given that grassroots women's rights activism in Lebanon has long operated outside the influence of transnational networks and international institutions, which have only gained prominence recently. Grassroots actors have always launched and facilitated projects on the ground (Abu Lughod 2019). However, through their shift in policy towards humanitarianism in international relations, the international community and international aid sectors are now more focused on

⁵ For another critical research on veiling, Islam, religion, and the non-Western world, see Göle (1996).

the grassroots and the actors at that level. However, the grassroots or local actors' agency is a reaction to the change of status quo.

This chapter analyzes the concept of law as a "travelling object"—a norm or value that moves across different social spaces. It emphasizes that these norms are not adopted passively but are actively adapted to local contexts to meet the specific needs of communities. NGOs act here as central actors who take up transnational norms, communicate them and embed them in local structures.

A particular focus is placed on the idea of reactive agency, where women and local actors respond to these transnational influences and, through processes of vernacularization, empower themselves. This self-empowerment also involves the ability to resist stereotypical or depoliticizing terms and to develop their own culturally rooted perspectives.

With this theoretical approach, the multilayered nature of gender and women's rights is revealed within the contexts of vernacularization, human rights activism, and international influences. The chapter further demonstrates how global discourses in the Global South are often distorted or masked to hide political agendas, and how the perspectives of the Global South on women's rights open up new, diverse viewpoints.

In summary, the concept of law in three different nuances serves as a central theme of my research. As already mentioned in this chapter, I consider law as a traveling object, as a form of mediation, and as a means to an end. These three perspectives enable me to examine the processes of vernacularization of women's rights through the work and activism of women's NGOs. They support my argument that these NGOs are important actors in the context of political empowerment and legal transformation. Therefore, they deserve greater attention as key players in the process of legal change.

All three concepts are grounded in a social process. When viewed as social roles, the question arises: how do interest groups such as women's rights activists act to influence legal reforms? Law, in this sense, undergoes a social process in order to bring about change. The "travelling concept", as described by Rottenburg et al. (2015), is particularly significant for my analysis. Ideas, norms, and perceptions circulate globally, are dynamic, move, and travel. According to Rottenburg et al. (2015), these concepts travel "neutrally" from one context to another—meaning that the cultural top-down hierarchy is not necessarily predominant. For my research, this implies that international law is a global norm, such as equality, which circulates across different contexts. Building on Çubuku's perspective (2018) that international

law plays a mediating role, this process occurs not only between directly affected actors (judges, politicians, decision-makers) but also across various levels and actors (or their combinations). This can happen at international, local, or transnational levels—visible in NGO discourses and in actual women's rights activism on the ground.

Law, therefore, is understood broadly and negotiated daily within the institutional work of NGOs (including formats such as codes of conduct, action plans, budgets, concept papers, protest actions, meetings, cooperation gatherings, project topics, personnel, projects, document formats, as well as financial and negotiation processes). The mediation of international law, following Çubuku, also involves professional engagement that creates space for solidarity and identification with international law. These spaces resonate with professional identity or activist dedication, fostering a sense of personal and collective belonging. Women's NGOs and their visions embody this in their institutional work.

Based on my main arguments, research questions, and scholarly contributions, I situate my work within anthropological discourses that address the questions of visibility and obscuration in the context of law and international aid. Global norms or international law, which are subject to transformation, require contextualization. This relates to the extent to which interests and agendas are intentionally or unintentionally practiced. In this sense, darkness and visibility are not only metaphors but also epistemological, structural, or actor-related actions that can be uncovered or understood.

This is relevant for engaging with issues of interpretive sovereignty and power relations during the implementation of laws and policies. My research has demonstrated that new, ritualized arenas or stages help to better understand hidden agendas and interests. Existing structures fundamentally shape these stages and their agendas.

1.3 State of the Art

1.3.1 Translations, Vernacularization and, Power Dynamics

Merry's Concept of Vernacularization

I refer to Merry's concept of vernacularization (2006), which addresses processes of translation where different legal systems intersect and evolve. According to Watson (1974) and Legrand (1997), this topic has been the subject of ongoing debate, resulting in diverse

interpretative patterns regarding the actors involved, the spaces, and the levels of translation. Merry's framework emphasizes both international and local law, often reflecting a hierarchical, top-down perspective with international law positioned at the top.

In the context of local translation, Merry, alongside Levitt (2009) distinguishes between hybridization—where laws undergo significant transformation—and replication—where norms are adapted with minimal change. She derives the concept of vernacularization from actor-network theory (Latour 1996), highlighting that translation is actor-centered. NGOs play a crucial mediating role, acting as intermediaries between international fora and grassroots communities. For example, Merry demonstrates how NGOs adapt human rights concepts and frame violence against women, translating international norms into local justice systems. The underlying cultural argument is that international law must often be locally adapted to produce meaningful legal change.

Eckert et al. (2012) refer to Ben Habib's (2004) concept of "itineration" and argue that a sole focus on translation neglects the processes within translation chains and the roles of involved actors. This approach, along with the convergence of two different legal systems, suggests that despite the idea of legal pluralism, these cultural legal systems are already normatively established. Understanding culture as homogeneous overlooks heterogeneity and the struggles over value systems. The authors propose an ontological, fluid model of culture to better conceptualize translation processes.

Critics like De Sousa de Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito (2015) contend that Merry's binary, top-down model oversimplifies the complex, multilayered nature of translation, reinforcing hierarchical power structures and implying external delegitimization. Additionally, Eckert et al. (2012) highlight two further issues: first, that the model underestimates actors' agency and neglects the political complexity of their work; second, that NGOs are positioned too passively at the end of the translation chain, underplaying their active role in shaping legal and normative reforms.

Contributions and Critiques

My research contributes to the discussion on vernacularization, critiquing Merry's focus on a primarily cultural view of translation and her framing of human rights as an 'othering' process. Critics often highlight an implied power imbalance favoring a top-down

transfer of knowledge, where international actors are positioned hierarchically above local actors. However, I argue that localized expertise and knowledge production are often a hybrid—an unintended consequence of vernacularization—that emphasizes the agency of local actors and the relational networks they form.

At the same time, vernacularization processes can vary to the extreme, resulting in hybridization between transnational/global norms and culturally specific standards. In such cases, often only the name of the norm remains, as Merry (2006) observed in her work on women's rights translations within the UN and on violence against women in Southeast Asia. In my research, I interpret the unified secular family law, promoted by women's NGOs and embedded in their institutional vision with particular rights, as a form of hybrid vernacularization.

Merry views international law—particularly human rights—as something that can only be effectively transferred when adapted into local contexts through transformation, translation, and implementation (Collier 1976; Moore 1973; van Ufford 1987; von Benda-Beckmann 2002). She first introduced this concept in her influential work on gender violence, women's rights, and practices in South Asia (2006). She demonstrates how local women's rights activists, through legal procedures and the application of international law, translated rights claims into their local settings, enabling women to be recognized as legal subjects (Levitt and Merry 2009).

From a critical perspective, Merry's approach can be seen as framing human rights as responses to issues perceived as inherently cultural, with a trajectory that shifts across different social and legal contexts. While her approach has been influential in illustrating how activism can empower women and foster legal recognition—contributing to broader human rights goals (Levitt and Merry 2011)—there is a risk of oversimplifying the processes of translation, adaptation, and implementation, which are often more complex and less binary than her model suggests.

Furthermore, transformation is not limited to court rulings or judicial arenas (see Destrooper 2018). Emphasizing this opens the possibility of further developing the concept of vernacularization by highlighting the agency of individuals actively involved in localizing international norms for their own purposes. As part of this, the idea of projection will be elaborated in section 1.6.

Evolving Perspectives and Ethnographic Contributions

Although Eckert et al. (2012) already pointed out the binary perspective, the discussion around vernacularization remains lively and evolving. One could argue that new perspectives and changing contexts call for updated or more nuanced approaches that go beyond the initial critique.

An important aspect that has not been sufficiently reflected in the discussion so far is the agency of individuals and communities within vernacularization. In particular, understanding how these actors adapt and interpret internationally applicable laws to serve their own needs could provide deeper insights.

Moreover, it becomes evident that Merry's approach, despite its importance, offers a somewhat simplified view. It is crucial to highlight the different contexts and dynamics under which vernacularization occurs and to recognize that this aspect is not adequately addressed in Merry's argumentation.

This can be complemented by ethnographic studies from the Global South that explore vernacular processes in terms of political demands within civil society or local contexts. Such studies illustrate how local actors actively shape vernacularization processes to advance their demands and demonstrate how these processes are embedded within specific political and social contexts.

Vernacularization in Practice

Anthropologist Maila Stivens (2017) describes how new forms of women's activism in Malaysia have reframed their demands by making them vernacular, local, and explicitly distinct from Western ideas of modernity. She examines the challenges such activism entails, as it localizes women's claims—labeling them a regional or national version—while simultaneously aligning with universal ideas of international law and rights claims justified in the name of modernity. Stivens demonstrates the balancing act these women's activists perform, as they strive to meet various conceptual needs within the complex terrain of rights claims. To make these claims more visible in public discourse, rights must be transformed into political and performative acts at this level of contestation.

Anthropologists focusing on the practice and translation of political culture into local settings have also contributed to understanding vernacularization. Attention is paid to how

local interpretations of politics are exercised primarily through civil society. In her study of Islamist mobilization in Turkey (2002), Jenny White illustrates how the local is conceived as a tangible space relevant to local translation and differentiation. The challenge is how highly centralized regimes do not relinquish their authority locally but instead exercise informal influence and mobilize civil society and its participation. White emphasizes the importance of understanding how civil society is organized, how it can self-organize institutionally, and which social relationships and groups play central roles. Another key point is that the "local" often contrasts with the elite—the ordinary and average citizens. White asserts that local autonomy and self-empowerment are maintained and perceived as independent decision-making.

Simultaneously, in Turkey, ideological and Islamist religious ideas flow subtly into processes of political translation and mediation, often without affecting local autonomy. Sociologist Asef Bayat (1997) illustrates this with his case study from Tehran, showing how civil society organizations—often in the form of NGOs—disseminate national movements and political agendas, translating them into local contexts. Similarly, gender and political theorist Diane Singerman (1995) analyses urban Cairo, examining how actors outside the official political establishment influence civil society and how official actors and their networks shape political representation. These studies reflect on how civil society can act autonomously and how the formal-informal dichotomy in politics is translated into everyday practices.

Having explored Merry's concept of vernacularization and extended understanding of how women's rights are locally practiced and adapted within specific contexts, the discussion now turns to Ferguson's concept of depoliticization. While vernacularization emphasizes the local appropriation and reinterpretation of global ideas, depoliticization focuses on how political and social issues are often neutralized or concealed within international aid projects. This process can lead to a depoliticized landscape that obscures underlying power dynamics and social conflicts. When I use the term depoliticization, I understand it as processes in which social, political, or feminist concerns are neutralized, obscured, or depoliticized through technocratization, routine procedures, or the agendas of foreign policy actors.

1.3.2 Antipolitics and Depoliticization in International Aid

The Concept of Anti-Politics and Depoliticization

James Ferguson's influential work *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (1990) has profoundly shaped and sharpened my analytical perspective on these empirical observations. His approach and critique sparked lively debates in development anthropology, particularly about how international development projects often depoliticize social and political concerns.

A prominent example is the practice of gender mainstreaming, which has been adopted by development agencies as a technocratic method that ostensibly promotes gender equality but frequently removes feminist arguments from political accountability (Cornwall et al. 2008; Cornwall 2000; 2006).⁶ Empirically, this often results in women's rights in contexts such as Lebanon becoming politically neutralized or receiving less attention within both international and national spheres. Mainstream gender discourse and involvement tend to reinforce existing political and economic systems within the broader political economy, thus maintaining the status quo.

This critique leads to a broader observation: scholars, especially from the Global South, have increasingly challenged the embedding of neoliberal governmentality within the politics of international development. These debates highlight how development projects and aid policies often reproduce neoliberal logics, even when claiming to promote democratization and social justice (Gurung 2004; Batliwala & Dhanraj 2007; Karim 2008; Sharma 2008). Many of these scholars adopt a historical perspective, contextualizing ongoing shifts in development paradigms. From this vantage point, the necessity of exploring alternative forms of agency, empowerment, and capacity-building by key actors becomes clear (Cornwall & Edwards 2010). As Aradhana Sharma (2008: 16) states, "neoliberal governmentalization of empowerment can make political activism and transformation possible." Here, capacity and agency are conceived as vital avenues for social change and activism.

However, this perspective also exposes how structures of neoliberal governance—such as the conception and allocation of funding for empowerment projects—generate particular modes of interpretation (Jackson & Pearson 2000). I suggest that these structures

⁶ This issue has already been discussed in detail in the 'Gender in International Aid' section.

tend to be reactive, self-perpetuating, and self-legitimizing, often maintaining their authority at the expense of genuine local agency.

Critical Reflections on Ferguson's Approach

Contrasting this, David Mosse (2003) criticizes Ferguson's framework, acknowledging some conceptual reservations. Mosse contends that Ferguson neglects the governmentality of development projects, especially the legal and structural dimensions involved. According to Mosse, Ferguson's analysis tends to focus too narrowly on discursive aspects—such as policy papers and documents—thereby neglecting the agency of actors at both local and international levels. I share Mosse's critique but would go further by emphasizing the crucial role of legal frameworks and their influence at the local level. While Mosse mainly considers international actors within global institutions, I focus on those active at the local level whose work is deeply embedded in legal and political contexts.

This perspective underscores the third major contribution I aim to make in my dissertation: that human rights advocacy, or rights-based activism, is often marginalized or overlooked within development policies and cooperation efforts. The legal dimensions of rights—and the actors who promote them—are frequently obscured within development strategies and projects.

Development Cooperation in Transition: From Anthropology to "Aidland" and "Peaceland"

The field of developmental anthropology gained prominence in the 1980s, a period marked by increased engagement of anthropologists with NGO projects and international development institutions (Ferguson 1990; Ferguson & Gupta 1997; 2002; Escobar 1991; 1995). This engagement fostered new theoretical frameworks that challenged traditional development paradigms and promoted participatory approaches prioritizing local knowledge and agency.

Today, development is increasingly intertwined with concepts such as "good governance" and "international development" (Anders 2005). It is positioned at the intersection of political processes, institutional interests, and global policy agendas. In the introduction to his volume on ethnography and international aid—a co-edited volume with

David Lewis— David Mosse (Mosse & Lewis 2005: 1) defines international development as follows:

today international development policy is characterized by the convergence of ideas of neoliberal reform, democratization and poverty reduction within a framework of 'global governance'.

Mosse and Lewis (2006a, 2006b) conceptualize the political and operational landscape of international development as "aidland", a complex and often contested space where aid policies, institutions, and actors interact. Others refer to this sphere as "peaceland" (Autesserre 2014), emphasizing its role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Humanitarianism and Human Rights: Structures, Logics, Criticism

Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein have observed that some anthropologists have concentrated their studies on institutions and professionals involved in humanitarian work, exploring the structural and operational aspects of humanitarianism. Conversely, other researchers have examined how humanitarian ideas influence state politics and governance expectations (Bornstein & Redfield 2011: 24). Bornstein further notes that anthropology's unique contribution to this interdisciplinary field lies in its capacity to engage with ambiguity. It recognizes that concrete actions and events often exist in the interstices between clear-cut concepts, and that understanding these nuances is vital for bridging scholarship and practice (Bornstein & Redfield 2011: 26).⁷

Mark Duffield (2005) offers a critical perspective on European-centric humanitarianism, challenging the boundaries and distinctions traditionally drawn between

⁷ The literature on humanitarianism also depicts the connection between religion and altruism, manifesting itself in humanitarian action. Humanitarian action is becoming increasingly institutionalized, and organizations, mostly NGOs, are responsible for this. I want to reduce stereotypes, and therefore I do not want to delve into the influence of religion in this context in my research. I will primarily consider Eurocentric international humanitarianism, which has emerged through the international community and its institutions and international legal treaties. I discuss international humanitarianism and forms of interventions in chapter 6, using the example of international agency and authority in Lebanon.

For more detailed information on religion, NGOs, and international development policy, see Heuser (2020) or De Cordier (2009).

development, humanitarianism, and human rights. This critique underscores how European-centered humanitarian practices often construct and reproduce specific moral and political narratives that shape global aid practices deeply.

Humanitarian Logics & Legal Framework

In humanitarianism, the concept of helping plays a central role. Humanitarianism is legally oriented and defined by the international agenda (De Lauri 2018), structured through agreements and treaties under international law. These legal frameworks facilitate interventions between states and, more recently, within states, based on legal provisions and obligations.

Moral Turn & Global Suffering

Furthermore, international development and cooperation have been profoundly influenced by what some scholars refer to as a "moral turn" (Derks and Nguyen 2020). This shift emphasizes the imperative of suffering (Calhoun 2008) and a moral obligation to reduce it (Çubukçu 2017; McManus 2017). The suffering and victimization of those who have not been protected or whose basic human needs remain unmet have led to the emergence of a new recognized form of global suffering—one that legitimizes and justifies international humanitarian intervention.

This focus on suffering has also produced new social categories, often gendered, within humanitarian discourse. Women are frequently portrayed as the most vulnerable or affected by suffering, which reinforces stereotypes of innocence and passivity (Ticktin 2006). Ticktin contends that moralizing language within humanitarian discourse perpetuates particular notions of suffering, especially concerning the female body (Ticktin 2017). The female body is seen as highly vulnerable and in need of protection, enabling international actors to act on its behalf, often under the guise of care.

Ticktin describes this form of suffering as part of an "international regime of care", a global humanitarian framework that, in effect, reproduces victimization. Additionally, dependencies and entanglements inherent to global politics often sustain and exacerbate human suffering (Ticktin 2011). As a result, women's NGOs and activist groups have exploited

this perspective to empower self-determination and resistance, challenging and attempting to redefine the field of care for their own benefit.

Gender, Victims and the Politics of Death

However, the intense focus on the suffering female body is mostly directed at those who are already deceased—that is, dead bodies. The dead symbolize the extreme point of suffering, and their quantification helps justify urgent intervention. Images of dead bodies serve as powerful visual representations of the necessity for change and intervention. Scholars have explored how the meanings and visibility of necropolitics—the politics of death—evolve within humanitarianism and morality (Mbembe & Libby 2003; Mbembe 2019). Other approaches examine the uncertainties and chaos created by ad hoc resolutions, which often arise from interventionist strategies (Dunn 2012; 2014).

New Perspectives and Critical Analysis

While Ferguson criticizes bureaucracy and technocratic rationality, Didier Fassin highlights the political dimension of humanitarian reception and exclusion through European refugee policy. Fassin (2007; 2011) contextualizes this form of international suffering, victimization, and care within the framework of the so-called "European humanitarian refugee crisis", precipitated by political upheavals like the Syrian civil war. Starting in 2015, European countries, particularly Germany, began granting asylum to individual refugees. Fassin investigates the mechanisms and politics of inclusion and exclusion, especially concerning legal statuses and political categorization, comparing these practices with earlier international humanitarian interventions following conflicts and wars. He underscores the dominance of humanitarian discourse and its practice as a hegemonic force.

Many humanitarian or development workers often enact their own implicit theories through practice—sometimes unintentionally—highlighting the blurred boundaries between development and humanitarian aid (Bornstein & Redfield 2011). While these fields have distinct features and historical contexts, ongoing debates reveal how interconnected and often overlapping their operational principles are.

Research Gap & Own Perspective

In conclusion, I consider Merry's concept of vernacularization and Ferguson's analysis of depoliticization as insightful, especially when combined, as theoretical approaches to illuminate the discrepancy between theory and practice. Merry's concept of vernacularization, which highlights how global norms are adapted and reinterpreted locally, can also shed light on how depoliticization often emerges as a side effect or product of this process, emphasizing the complex dynamics between local agency and global discourses. Ferguson's critique of depoliticization provides valuable frameworks to investigate the agency and visibility of local organizations within the international discourse. Both approaches enable a critical examination of how local voices and perspectives are frequently neglected or insufficiently acknowledged in the global human rights agenda.

This research aims to focus on the lack of visibility and recognition of the agency of local organizations in the international discourse and during agenda-setting processes. There exists a significant research gap in the literature regarding the impacts of international aid and development projects on women's rights. This dissertation seeks to address this gap, with particular attention to how processes of vernacularization and depoliticization influence local agency. By examining the experiences and strategies of local NGOs and activists, the study aims to shed light on the challenges they face and to demonstrate how their agency and influence are often limited within the global context. The overarching goal is to explore and identify factors that hinder their voices and concerns from gaining greater prominence, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex power relations and dynamics at play in contemporary development and human rights discourses.

1.4 Research Argument

This thesis advances three core arguments and makes three significant contributions. The first demonstrates how Lebanese women's NGOs develop a distinctive, locally adapted form of women's rights activism that negotiates and incorporates universal ideas within the specificities of the national context. This vernacularized approach enables organizations to present their advocacy independently and autonomously. The "Made in Lebanon" label

underscores the unique aspects of the local context, particularly through the efforts of grassroots organizations and their work on the ground.

This Lebanese "state-making" process addresses localized areas of human rights, such as the development of an inclusive family law that is neither religious nor anti-religious but distinctly areligious. Moreover, it is *asectarian*, that relies on religious affiliation, instead pursuing systemic social change. In doing so, it increases the visibility of women's rights in Lebanon and demonstrates how global human rights ideas can be integrated into daily social practices without necessarily conforming to Western norms or standards.

The second argument focuses on the strategies employed by these NGOs, which I interpret through João Biehl's (2016) concept of "state craft"—the mechanisms and paradigms that influence the formation of "statehood", particularly in the field of public health. Building on Biehl's framework, I analyze how Lebanese NGOs shape and "craft" statehood through their strategies. While I draw on his ideas, I adapt his concept to examine how local NGOs engage in this process.

Drawing on this theoretical backdrop, we can take a closer look at the strategic approach of Lebanese women's NGOs. Through their institutionalized activism, their primary objective is to secularize the existing legal and political system. They use targeted strategies to create a unified secular family law that aims to overcome confessional and sectarian divisions. These NGOs primarily use advocacy, education and legal campaigns, particularly legal initiatives, to achieve this. Their legal campaigns empirically aim to reform family laws and other legal frameworks related to women's rights, including civil and criminal law. These efforts serve as a "means to an end": they are designed to promote long-term social cohesion, justice and systemic reform. Through targeted legal reforms, these NGOs seek to challenge and transform existing confessional and sectarian legal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and social division. Their ultimate objective is to overcome sectarian divides through legal and political reforms, thereby fostering inclusive and stable societal structures.

The third argument emphasizes that Lebanese women's NGOs operate within the framework of international human rights and law, acting as mediators between global standards and local needs. They project and adapt universal human rights ideas to the specific socio-cultural-political context of Lebanon, utilizing transnational networks and partnerships. This dual engagement—local and global—is also a "means to an end": it aims to enable

sustainable social transformation by ensuring that local successes influence international discourse, and that international norms support local advocacy.

Beyond these arguments, the thesis makes additional contributions. It critically engages with recent developments in international aid, particularly the shift towards gender- and women-empowerment projects. Cornwall (2007) critiques that many of these initiatives function as "buzzwords", which dilute feminist claims for genuine equality and social change. Instead of fostering meaningful transformation, these projects are often instrumentalized—primarily used to generate visibility through protests, posters, and public campaigns—often driven by donor mandates.

This trend poses serious risks, especially in the MENA region, where women's movements are frequently stereotyped. After September 11, Muslim and Arab women were often portrayed as passive victims in need of rescue. Such stereotypes undermine their autonomy and stigmatize their activism further. Moreover, research reveals that human rights are not merely "imported from outside": they are deeply embedded within societies—often in invisible ways. Over the past two decades, transnational networks and movements have emerged to strengthen local actors and actively promote the concept of agency. These networks operate beyond traditional international conventions, creating new pathways for embedding human rights practices, challenging stereotypical narratives, and transforming social realities.

This underscores that human rights are not just external or imported concepts but are shaped through a dynamic exchange between global norms and local contexts. It is a complex, actively mediated process, in which key actors work to visibly reshape social practices on the ground.

1.5 Research Contribution

My research examines how women's rights activists, organizations, and institutions in Lebanon craft a multifaceted form of activism by engaging with international conferences and carefully navigating local contexts and challenges. Unlike many studies focusing primarily on the effects of international aid, this work aims to fill a critical gap by exploring the experiences, strategies, and challenges of local NGOs and activists within the global framework. It highlights

how their agency operates in nuanced ways, resisting discourses of depoliticization and technocratic funding mechanisms that often overshadow local realities.

A core concept guiding this analysis is vernacularization—how transnational norms are locally adapted, shaped, and sometimes resisted. In the Lebanese postcolonial context, this process is rooted in cultural, religious, and political specificities. Moving beyond simplistic models and globalist narratives, this approach offers an empirically grounded understanding of feminist agency, illustrating how local actors actively negotiate tensions between international standards and societal particularities.

Building on Merry's (2006) discourse on vernacularization, I critically analyze how local actors mobilize transnational norms. While Merry emphasizes the importance of local agency, her framework tends to overlook the diversity and complexity of vernacularization processes. My work addresses this by emphasizing that vernacularization is multifaceted, reactive, and deeply embedded in Lebanon's social and political landscape, underscoring the need for future analyses to consider these intricacies more thoroughly.

This analysis also engages with broader debates on the interaction between international law, local realities, and aid practices. From a feminist perspective that emphasizes cultural and religious contexts, I respond to Ferguson's (1990) critique of depoliticization—highlighting how many women's empowerment projects are increasingly framed as humanitarian rescue missions, often ignoring women's political agency. Such narratives tend to depoliticize gender struggles, reduce women to victims, and reinforce Western-centric stereotypes about Arab and Muslim identities, thus undermining local resistance and political activism.

My central theoretical contribution is to conceptualize law as a "traveling object", enabling a nuanced ethnographic analysis of how feminist agency manifests within Lebanese activism and aid domains. This perspective reveals how local actors vernacularize transnational norms, actively shaping global frameworks that threaten to depoliticize their struggles. It aligns with debates on vernacularization and soft law, emphasizing the importance of cultural and religious dimensions often overlooked in universalist models (see Merry 2006).

By integrating these perspectives, my work demonstrates how feminist actors navigate tensions between transnational norms and local particularities, maintaining agency within complex and often conflicting pressures. This is especially relevant within Lebanon's

postcolonial landscape, where narratives of legal reform and empowerment are intertwined with social and political realities.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theories from multiple disciplines to analyze these issues from various angles. This methodological diversity fosters innovative insights and broadens the scope of the research.

Taking this further, I argue that human rights do not simply originate from external sources, but are also local, albeit often invisible. Destrooper, who co-edited a book with Merry in 2018 on human rights practices, emphasizes that, over the past two decades, human rights have developed not only through international law, but also through new transnational networks and movements. These developments cannot be reduced solely to conventional international forums. I agree with Merry that the concept of vernacularization helps us to understand how the connection between human rights and family law is shaped by providing a frame of reference for activism and advocacy. Women's rights activists use this frame of reference to secure project funding and cooperation, and to promote political or legal measures that align with their own agendas and visions. This process often occurs within international aid or politics.

However, I differ from Merry in that, in practice, the top-down approach appears considerably more heterogeneous. NGOs are not always at the center, nor are they necessarily at the end of the translation chain. Nevertheless, the top-down dynamic is present within the field itself (for example, between NGOs and grassroots organizations), often structured by the traditional framework of policy implementation associated with development and international aid — meaning that something originates from outside and is then implemented internally.

Finally, I emphasize the invisibility of local actors within international discourse, addressing a significant gap in the literature. While the impact of aid projects on women's rights has been extensively studied, the agency of local NGOs and activists has been under-explored — an issue I investigate in detail. As Merry (2006) notes, global discourses often trivialize local complexities. I extend this critique by demonstrating that vernacularization is a dynamic process.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

In this section, I discuss my conceptual framework, which is rooted in my theoretical approach and the current state of the art. It becomes evident how projections can serve as activist strategies within this context. I understand projections as the conscious or unconscious transmission of ideas, visions, or norms into a specific setting to effect change or mobilize support. Within an activist framework, projections act as strategic tools to formulate goals, foster acceptance, and drive societal transformations. They enable the interpretation of global ideals or standards in ways that are relevant to local contexts, making the message more effective and resonant.

Central to this process is the dual role played by women's rights NGOs. On one hand, they act as translators of international norms and standards, transforming global human rights concepts into accessible and culturally adapted messages. On the other hand, they serve as local innovators, recognizing the cultural and social needs of their communities and integrating these into the norms. This dual function helps ensure that international legal standards are not only conveyed but also embedded within the societal fabric, facilitating sustainable change.

This dynamic can be further understood through the concepts of *visibility*, *visions*, and *projections*. These terms are continually elaborated upon in my ethnographic and empirical data and are crucial for understanding women's rights and the authority—both legal and social—that accompanies them. The three concepts are interconnected: visibility is created through visions of women's rights, which are realized through the work of NGOs employing projections in their projects. These visions are actively interpreted, adapted, and made popular within project frameworks.

The underlying translation process is primarily carried out through project work. This translation transforms visions into reality, which in turn generates visibility. My conceptual framework thus consists of three key components: visibility, vision, and projection. In the subsequent section, I explore the interconnectedness of these components within the context of women's rights and international aid.

1.6.1 The Concept of Visibility, Visions and Projections

In this work, I use the term *visibility* to describe actions aimed at strengthening representations of subjectivities and fostering transnational networks. I see visibility as a tool of mediation—that is, a means through which social change and transformation are projected. It unpacks the goal of challenging and altering the existing status quo; in doing so, it aligns with systemic, structural, and feminist critique.

visions, on the other hand, represent clear ideas about how the current system should be transformed and what the impacts of social change could look like. They are long-term, strategic frameworks that guide future actions.

Projection refers to the psychoanalytic concept, specifically how women's NGOs project a vision of social change into their environment. These projections are responses to local disjunctures and sometimes even constitute disjunctures themselves (Appadurai 1990; Lewis and Mosse 2006).

The lack of visibility of women becomes particularly evident when examining large datasets and political and legal decisions. Big data reveals gender gaps and inequalities, making disparities more apparent. Often, women are excluded from being counted as relevant actors within statistics and surveys because the models and calculations used are predominantly male-centric (Criado Perez: 2019). In her book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado Perez highlights how the exclusion of "unimportant" data—i.e., data that does not focus on women—leads to political, economic, and legal decisions that ignore women's lived realities and perspectives. She argues that "this conclusion can only be reached in a culture that conceives of men as the human default and women as a niche aberration" (Criado Perez 2019: 241).

Another crucial aspect in understanding women's visibility involves Big Data analysis. This approach enables the identification of systemic inequalities and hidden gaps in how women are represented across society, politics, and law. For example, Big Data uncovers gender disparities in participation, representation, and influence that often remain unseen in traditional statistics. These data demonstrate how women frequently remain invisible within official records and decision-making processes because the data collection methods and models are often based on male norms. Thus, Big Data analysis is vital for revealing structural causes of inequality and supporting the case for societal and legal reforms (Criado Perez 2019).

For women's rights claims to lead to meaningful political and social change, they first need to be translated into concrete proposals (Stivens 2017). This process requires a political space where the visions of women activists and the pursuit of gender equality can unfold. Therefore, I see political vision as an imaginative and strategic framework—an overarching long-term guide for action.

Throughout this research, I emphasize how women's NGOs project their demands to make them visible. Their work involves deploying various actions to address injustices, with the aim of effecting legal and social improvements. In this context, visibility refers to the range of activities that contribute to achieving gender justice, and women's NGOs are understood as organizations that project a vision of women's rights and empowerment through advocacy and rights-based work.

To understand this process more deeply, I draw on psychoanalytic concepts of projection as developed by Freud and further elaborated by others like Kant. Freud's theories have profoundly shaped psychoanalytic research and continue to influence European public discourse on individual behavior since the early 20th century. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1998: 401–407) describe projection as an act of "throwing something outward", which can be physical but also represent the transfer of plans, motives, or desires. Women's activists and NGOs use projections as a way of envisioning future change—casting forward ideas, expectations, and goals that shape their strategies and visibility efforts.

In this context, projection means "throwing" ideas, values, and wishes outward—much like a projector makes images visible. In terms of women's rights activism, women and their bodies serve as space upon which rights claims are projected; rights are experienced, perceived, and enacted through the body. Imagery, narratives, subjectivities, and normative or moral ideals all contribute to making issues visible. Visibility functions to represent life contexts and delineate boundaries with others or institutions. Meanwhile, projection involves transferring personal ideas, desires, or traits onto others or objects—and sometimes projecting unmet needs or desires that challenge social norms.

Concerns about visibility focus on addressing imbalances, inequalities, and grievances. These concerns are articulated and recognized through assertive demands. Women's NGOs and activists translate these problems into visible actions, aiming to highlight injustices and push for change. Ultimately, in my framework, Visibility underscores the work of women's

NGOs in making women's rights and issues more seen and understood—both through action and symbolic projection—thus fostering social and political awareness.

In brief, the relationship between visions, projections and visibility forms the core element of my analytical approach to understanding how women's NGOs strategically create social change.

1.7 Geographical and Historical Contextualization

This section serves as a geographical and legalistic overview which contextualizes my work. Legal background, along with geographical location, plays a significant role in the research field when talking about legality, activism, development, and humanitarian aid.

1.7.1 Legal Traditions, Shared Power, and the Status Quo

Before moving on to my ethnographic analysis, the next chapter sets the political and legal context of Lebanon. The chapter examines the unusual position of religions in relation to the state, and also looks at the embedding of values, religious influence and power in politics and especially in society. Sects are political but religiously motivated. Religious affiliation instrumentalizes and categorizes the various denominational groups. Muslim and Christian are the main political categories through which cultural and social belonging is manifested. They are identity labels and demarcation marks.

Political System

Lebanon's political system is a form of consociationalism with a proportional system related to confessions or religious groups, called sects. The modern Lebanese state has its sectarian power-sharing system since the constitution passed in 1926 (Hakim 2019). To better understand the development of this system, it is important to examine the origins and influences from the Ottoman Empire era. The association between ethnic and confessional affiliations emerged during the Ottoman Empire, which began in approximately the 15th century and lasted until 1918 (Akarli 1988; Ahmad 2005; Macfie 2014; Hakim 2019). The system's origins are in the landscape of political parties in the 1920s (Assi 2016). Ethnic and

confessional affiliation tied to larger family clans and communities with a remarkable land property and wealth that characterized political parties' membership. The patronage system and clientelism resulted from this structure and became institutionalized in economic, political, and legal relationships and negotiations (Gilsenan 1996). Clientelism, which emerged from historical social structures, has not only affected politics; additionally, it has intricately shaped the legal frameworks in Lebanon.

The Ottoman administration established the millet system, a Muslim system based on a community system of several religious groups (Barkey 2005). The system underwent multiple modernizing legal reforms since the formation of the Ottoman Empire, and it has been institutionalized into the political and legal system in Lebanon. All communities fell under the dominant legal Muslim jurisdiction (see Itzkowitz 2008). The *millet system* serves as a model for later modern multi-confessional systems because it allows for religious plurality and coexists peacefully among different religious groups, even if it is presented in an idealized way. (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016; Cakal 2020). The *millet system* managed to recognize and tolerate the practice of religion under some conditions and in a specific framework. Non-Muslim communities obtained camouflage outside and inside the territorial borders of the Ottoman Empire. The communities had to remit taxes in return (Barkey and Gavrilis 2016). A better understanding of these internal power structures is crucial for capturing the legal changes that shape Lebanon's current political system.

Legal Changes

After addressing the foundational aspects of the political system in the previous section, we will now examine how these structures are embedded in the legal system and have evolved over time. Greater Lebanon, the antecedent of the modern state of Lebanon, expanded its territorial size through the annexation of Christian groups that inhabited areas formerly part of the French mandate of Syria and Lebanon (1926-1945). This especially included the Maronites, an ethnoreligious Christian group identified with the territory, jurisprudence, and congregation of the Syriac Maronite Church (Zamir 1999). The classic millet system preserves and further institutionalizes religious autonomy, plurality, and particularity regarding family affairs. This structure was further reinforced during the French colonial mandate (Hakim 2019).

The government of the French mandate established a proportional agreement between Muslims and Christians in its constitution. However, it did not specifically assign religious groups to government and administrative structures. The National Pact, established in 1943, constituted and formed a Christianity-based agreement. National security and military affairs, along with the Prime Minister's presidential office, were required to be run by a delegate from a Christian sect. The proportion of Christians to Muslims within Parliament and the judiciary remained 50:50 until 1975, when civil war broke out, in accordance with the National Pact.

The Taif Agreement, a peace accord, modified constitutional law for the last time in 1989, the date of its inception marking the end of the civil war. The confessional quota changed to 6:5, in favor of the Christian population. Their numerical share was based on the result of the 1935 census. The national census from 1923 necessitates the French colonial purpose of not including the potentially outnumbering number of the Shia and Sunni Muslim populations. Instead, the French administration gave more political power—in the form of parliamentary seats—to Christians (Hakim 2019). However, since then, different narratives and discourses about the ideal proportional relationship have persistently arisen (Assi 2016).

In the following section, this diversity of sects is visually mapped to provide a clearer understanding of their geographical differences, relationship choices and relationships with other sects.

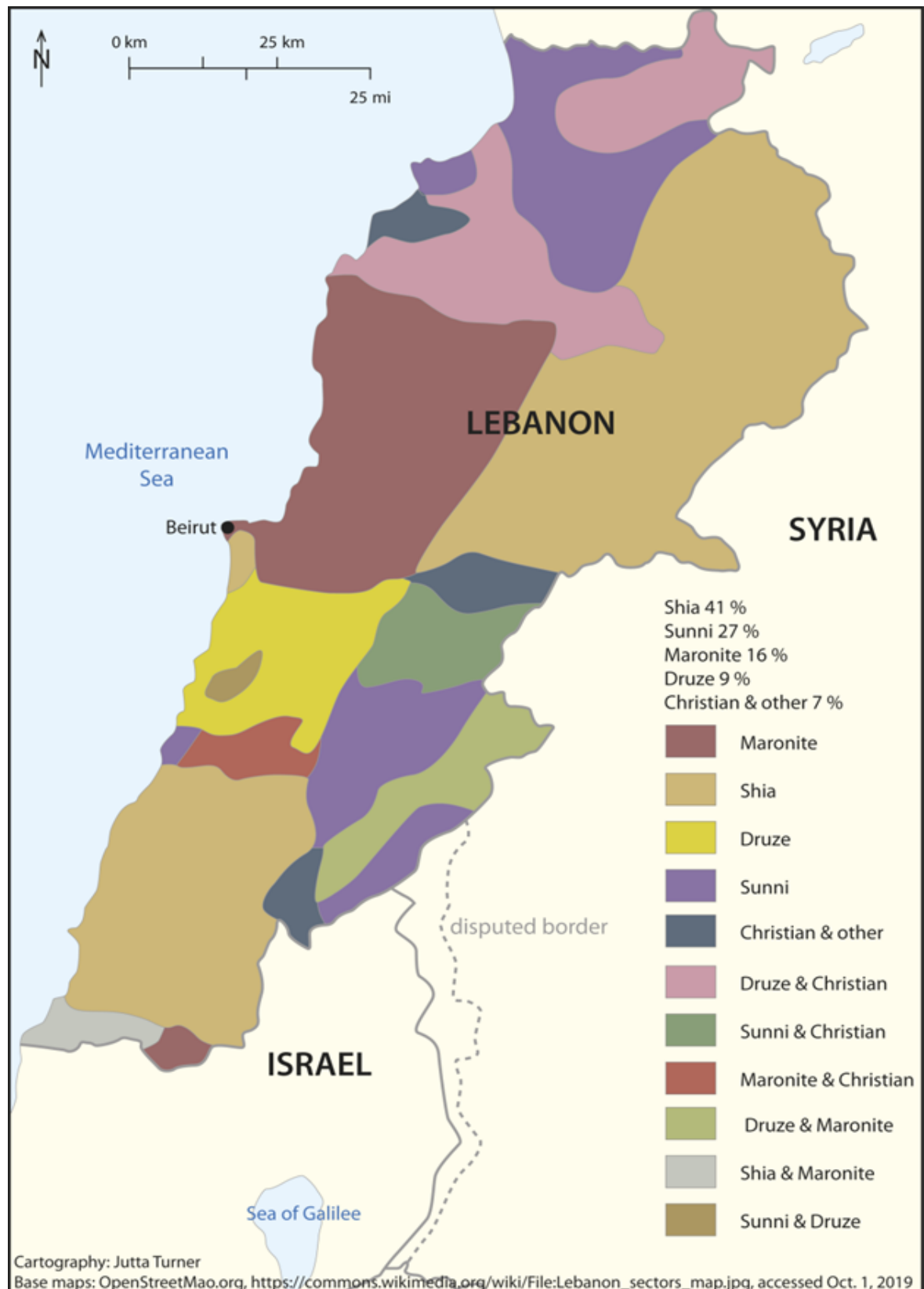


Table 1 - Lebanon's official sectarian taxonomy, classified according to districts and each respective group's majority

French Influence on Legality in Lebanon

After addressing the foundational aspects of the political system in the previous section, we will now examine how these structures are embedded in the legal system and have evolved over time. The Lebanese legal system acquired a domineering French political influence through French colonial administrative governance and control. The French influence and presence in the region comply with colonial, political, and economic self-interest. The French administration also adjusted juridical and constitutional texts in its mandates (Shehadeh 1998). Moreover, educational institutions embraced French norms and rules. For example, the Catholic University of Saint-Joseph is still the only public, academic university in Lebanon where legal sciences are taught. Therefore, the French administration had a considerable influence on Lebanon's legal system.

A key characteristic of Lebanon's legal pluralism is the transfer of power to religious authorities. This shift allows religious institutions to govern personal and family matters. The Lebanese constitution declares the autonomy of religious communities and courts in Article 9.⁸ Furthermore, it authorizes religious authorities to govern personal and family matters. Personal status and family laws are codified and community related. They express the claim of freedom of religious choice and thought. Israeli political scientist Meir Zamir sums up the dilemma within the Lebanese legal system as follows:

The constitution provided Lebanon with a political framework within which the elements of a polarized, sectarian society could coexist and pursue a national consensus. However, the various groups and communities differed in their perception of the constitution. Some viewed it as the manifestation of their country's independence, sovereignty and its affinity with the West, while others regarded it as an expression of Christian and French colonialist domination. Some considered it almost a miraculous solution to Lebanon's religious and sectarian divisions. In contrast, others saw it as guaranteeing their share in the political system or their dominance of the state. The constitution thus embodied two conflicting concepts: a genuine desire to implement a Western political system based on equality and universal suffrage, regardless of religion or sect, and sectarianism, which was deeply entrenched in Lebanon's political and social culture (1997: 29).

In summary, jurisprudence in Lebanon is arranged into administrative, military, civil, and family law, the latter composed of multiple systems. The penal, administrative, and judicial

⁸ The right of consciousness is enshrined in the Lebanese Constitutions as the following: La liberté de conscience est absolue. En rendant hommage au Très-Haut, l'Etat respecte toutes les confessions et en garantit et protège le libre exercice à condition qu'il ne soit pas porte atteinte à l'ordre public. Il garantit également aux populations, a quelque rite qu'elles appartiennent, le respect de leur statut personnel et de leurs intérêts religieux" (République Libanaise 2006 URL).

codes, personal status system, family laws, national law, and security apparatus originate from French imperialism. The Taif Agreement reconfigured the political and legal sectarian census system in 1943, conforming it with the constitutional, legal, and political order. Legacies of the Ottoman and French judicial systems and legal traditions, the oriental Christian tradition as well as Islamic legal tradition and customary law, explain the Lebanese legal system's distinctness from Anglo-Saxon legal systems (El-Gemayel 1985: 19; Gemayel and Jumayyil 1992).

Personal Status and Family Laws

Personal status laws are based on the law of April 1951, which is codified and defined in a legal statute. These laws apply to all Lebanese citizens, but some are linked to sectarian affiliation and not codified. Clear legal distinctions exist between denominations in terms of how autonomous and legitimate the government considers them to be in their private matters, and how competent they are in the criminal law that counts for all denominations in the same way. There are also restrictions on certain individual sects, which manifest themselves in their governmental legitimacy (El-Gemayel 1998). Understanding these historical and legal frameworks is essential not only for academic purposes but also for contemporary women's rights activists seeking to navigate the challenges posed by Lebanon's sectarian divisions.

In general, statute personal status laws require that individuals defer to the authority of the confessional judiciary they belong to. The confessional judiciary has the responsibility and competence to proceed with family and personal affairs. Eighteen confessional groups are officially recognized, with 15 family laws and courts in total (Shehadeh 1998). Accordingly, family matters such as divorce, alimony, marriage, inheritance, and custody of children remain the exclusive responsibility of religious institutions (Maktabi 2013). Such a system establishes and maintains the family unit as the most pivotal and important type of social organization, one with a hierarchical structure and a male leader (Salameh 2015). Such a shift in authority and the decisive political "free pass" it bestows is in accord with France's imperialist, colonial legacy as well as what remains of the modern French power structure in Lebanon. Lebanon was a French mandate but had some legal traditions from the Ottoman Empire (El-Gemayel 1985).

Power to Religious Authority

The Lebanese constitution transferred administrative power and autonomy to the sects at the levels of the state and state public offices and authorities, in proportion to the size (with respect to the number of members) of their officially acknowledged religious groups. In this regard, a sense of unity couldn't develop within any given state unless that state's administration/government was inclusive of all the religious groups within it. As a consequence, people were more committed to their communities, which provided them with support and resources. The community-based system provides independence to follow religious-cultural habits and customs (Shehadeh 1998).

Sectarian affiliation with a legacy of kinship and socioeconomic, class, and family ties is widespread in the Arab World, particularly in the MENA (Middle East and Northern Africa)⁹ region (Hanf 2015; Hudson 1977; Maktabi 2010; 2013). This identification with religious entities being a motivating force mobilizes political and social reasons. The sectarian political system enhances the institutionalization and instrumentalization of religion. Its patriarchal structure of political clientelism and the legal system shapes social norms (Haugbolle 2010; Salameh 2015).

Power to Sectarianism and Sectarianization

From the activist perspective that guides this research, the Lebanese legal system's core issue is not the categorization of sects themselves, but rather sectarianism as a relational process and social behavior. The process of sectarianism shapes and interferes in everyday public and private life, demonstrating the essential formation of sects as both identificatory and distinctive features. Their strength and influence become particularly relevant in the context of political decisions and power dynamics.

In Lebanon, sects are confessional subgroups of broader religious categories. They often appear fixed and static (Majed 2016a; Mikdashi 2011). However, what representatives from different sects decide, negotiate, and implement—using the power they receive and sustain—is pivotal. Beyond the recognition of sects in legal and political spheres, political parties are often connected to or affiliated with specific sects. Unsurprisingly, inter- and intra-

⁹ I am aware that this terminology is a construct and needs to be critically questioned. However, I will continue to use the term for the following reasons: Most of my informants used the geographical concept of MENA, and the literature still refers to the concept as well.

sectarian conflicts frequently destabilize Lebanon's political system; these conflicts have historically contributed to regional tensions and even led to civil war (Majed 2019).

Viewing sects through the lens of their dynamics and relationships—particularly with political parties and within religious groups—reveals the limits of sectarian identity itself, especially concerning power-sharing arrangements (Majed 2016a; 2016b). Analyzing the legal and political structures in Lebanon helps to understand how these factors influence broader issues such as rule of law, activism, development, and humanitarian aid, as outlined in the introduction.

In the next section, I will introduce the individual chapters. I will transition from the theoretical framework to the specific case studies, where both analytical approaches and ethnographic data will be employed. Central themes—such as power dynamics, representation, ethics, long-term effects, and researcher self-criticism—will be addressed in each chapter.

1.8 Chapter Section

1.8.1 Fieldwork, Data, and Method

The first chapter is devoted to the methodology of research and fieldwork. It introduces the field and the researcher's methodological tools, theories and concepts of fieldwork and data collection. The focus is on the anthropologist as witness and participant. The chapter also explores key issues of representation, values and systems of norms, where questions arise about aspects of morality in scholarship and the researcher's production of knowledge. Non-state actors relate the chapter to ethnography in the field of legal transformation. It demonstrates the importance of using ethnography in a way that is grounded in the research question.

The chapter explores the process of documentation and the pathways of knowledge. My writing style is narrative in nature, inspired by Rodolfo Maggio (2014), where I present various field-based narratives as sketches. These are integrated into the overarching narrative arc that tells the story of my main argument. Each individual story serves as a component of the overall narrative and is connected to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that provide its context.

1.8.2 Campaigning for (Legal) Change

The aim of the second chapter is twofold. First, it addresses the institutionalized campaign work that is connected to the awareness-raising and advocacy work NGOs mainly do. This chapter issues and highlights the relevance of women's rights advocacy work in institutional settings' routines. Specifically, I discuss how organizations both problematize and make visible how gender inequality becomes social inequality in Lebanon. The organizations – rendered in committees and joint units but institutionalized in the form of NGOs – address women's issues in discriminatory and gendered laws but also in the unequal jurisdiction between men and women when it comes to intimate relationships and family matters. NGOs do so through their institutional work by advocacy work that is ultimately linked to a rights-based approach, which is practiced often in legal campaign work such as lobbying, networking, and mobilization.

The chapter reveals how NGOs and their campaign work interfere in law- and decision-making processes, meddling and shaping public discourse, debates, and decisions in political fora. Campaign work constitutes, therefore, politicizing, problematizing, and claim-making work. Institutional campaign work aims to effect a value change, one tied to law or legal change and normative order. The chapter discusses concrete examples of value changes and translations in terms of law reforms, modifications, or alterations. These shifts can occur in either specific, individual legal articles or laws or even in the aspirational demand for change to current Lebanese constitutional law.

Second, I look at the historical background, traditions, and historical continuities. They have prevailed in new legal institutions and processes, which represent hindrances for gender justice and women's rights demands. In this part of the second chapter, I contextualize the contemporary Lebanese constitution, with its civil code, nationality law, and non-existent civil personal status laws in legal knowledge practices. They originate from a colonial system of thought, and the French mandate-imposed laws that still exist until contemporary times as historical continuities. Equal protection against gendered violence works as a tool for demanding legal justice through legal reform, amendments, and changes to make accountable and shift the responsibility to the state's institutions.

1.8.3 NGO Work

This chapter deals with institutionalized political activism and NGO work that forms the daily work of women's NGOs in Beirut. It deals with the fact that ethics have become professionalized; as Çubukçu (2018) has stated, international law becomes an international lawyer's profession, and they identify themselves with it. Other than lawyers, in this context, I will focus on how international law becomes employees of NGOs and women's rights activists' profession, and to what extent they construct their identity with the values of international law, global rights discourses and transnational activism and forms of solidarity. This chapter also highlights the everyday work of women's NGOs their tasks and duties. and what they understand and practice as women's rights implementation and gender equality. The chapter further shows how the visions and agendas of women's NGOs are envisioned in their work and institutional life already, and they are implemented or adapted.

1.8.4 Activism on the Ground

The third chapter documents women's rights activism. Sometimes activism's role is to demonstrate activity for its own sake, both for the activists themselves and to fulfil donors' requirements. The chapter describes three specific cases revealing activism on the ground, which I documented: 1) the Women's March on March 8, 2017, which was partly motivated by a similar movement in the United States; 2) PCA's "Campaign Manifestation", a sit-in at the Ministry for Work in February 2017, which sought to advocate for nationality and citizenship rights; 3) a March 14, 2017, sit-in, at the famous Riad al Solh square in front the Lebanese parliament building, which demanded political participation for women. Throughout the chapter I show that women's activism is a heterogeneous movement¹⁰ made up of many different groups and subgroups. The activism forms symbiotic version of knowledge production, institutional organization and (re-)presentation. The chapter combines the three documentation modalities of (1) differences, diversity, (2) growing institutionalism, and internationalism of international law, transnational networks, and (3) Lebanese politics.

¹⁰ I do not consider social movement theories. Therefore, social movements as a social phenomenon are not classified as social movements in this research. For further detailed information, see the work of Lebanese sociologist Rima Majid.

1.8.5 Performance and Staging of Donor-NGO Relationships

Stage, actors, and performance – this chapter focuses on a meeting between a donor and a donee (in this case, an NGO). It shows how international foreign relations and dependencies construct, reproduce, and maintain the relations of institutional actors. It also displays the reproduced power differential that matter about funding, bureaucratic standards, and liability. Institutionalized actors perform international and state politics in relation to funding expectations, formats, intentions, and practical, concrete applications of it. They impersonate such negotiations on the stage as the role between NGO and donor. The fifth chapter further highlights the increasing interest in international politics of gender and women's rights matters. They also partake in discussions and debates around women's further inclusion in politics and the public sphere together with their visibility. In this respect, donor-receiver relations negotiate forms of womanhood, linked to uniform formats, documents, and practical ideas.

1.8.6 Sanctions and institutionalized Agency of International Aid

The sixth and the last chapter looks at the governing of international humanitarianism that is practiced by international agencies. International means are tools that dictate how projects are governed and managed. In this chapter, I discuss the agency of international aid institutions against the backdrop of structural power, influence, and legitimacy. These institutions are able to decide whether aid is granted in accordance with local needs. International actors can sanction aid because of international politics. The chapter's main argument arises from the conceptual framework of affective and moral economy. The chapter also shows how the international agency of institutions needs permission to help in order to maintain its *raison d' être*. Finally, the chapter discusses the growing shift of international humanitarianism in international aid, which has an impact on projects, international aid funding, and the agendas of local social justice and development NGOs. Concretely, the humanitarian transformation is examined by women's rights project that is mainly advocacy-oriented and therefore, rights-based approach oriented.

Having summarized each of the chapters, I will now begin with the methodology chapter, where I will outline the research design, the methods used and the underlying

theoretical framework that informs my fieldwork. In the methodology chapter I will also discuss Didier Fassin and his approach to international humanitarian work (2007; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2017). Fassin's perspectives are central to my research question, as well as to the research field and data collection. His critical examination of the concept of impartiality within humanitarian aid will help to illuminate the complexities of donor-NGO relations and the changes taking place within the development and humanitarian sector.

2. Fieldsite, Subjectivity, and Data

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses issues related to my research, fieldwork, and methodology. It provides an overview of the (field) topic, and the methodological tools employed by researchers. To achieve this, the chapter introduces select theories and concepts related to ethnographic fieldwork, along with reflections on the subjectivity and morality of the researcher in the field as it exists today.

My focus is on local contexts where women's NGOs seek to transform laws and promote women's rights, often within the framework of international aid. These initiatives take place against a backdrop where international and local actors collaborate and influence each other. The research field is in a constant state of flux—oscillating between specific local spaces and broader global connectedness. I pay particular attention to processes that exemplify the constitution and inner logic of the field within particular contexts (Breidenstein et al. 2013).

This chapter aims to establish the relevance of ethnographic research within the fields of institutional and political activism, highlighting its unique contributions. To do so, I focus particularly on topics related to morality embedded in practices of humanitarianism, normative behavior, and the rule of law. Such moral concepts are deeply rooted in law, rules, and normative frameworks, serving as indicators of societal moral and cultural understandings and how they are negotiated.

In this context, a thematic triangle emerges, with three connected corners: morality, practiced humanitarianism, law, and normativity. This perspective naturally raises questions about ethics in scholarly research and the process of knowledge production.

As both witness and participant, the anthropologist's role becomes central—especially as her involvement begins to influence events (Breidenstein et al. 2013). The research field is socially constructed and accessible through personal contact, but access is inherently shaped by the researcher's positionality. Subjectivity, positionality, and spatial considerations all influence the research process and its outcomes.

Data, therefore, not only seeks to answer questions about its own production and dissemination, but also about its origins and how it is referenced. These considerations pertain to both the data generated directly by the researcher and that produced by other agents within the field. Access to the field, as well as the processes of knowledge production,

adaptation, and dissemination within asymmetrical social networks, are central to understanding the research landscape.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first analyzes my approach within the thematic framework of law, normative behavior, and morality, addressing ethnographic approaches in law and legal change, as well as questions of norms, values, and representation—particularly in relation to the researcher's positionality. The second part reflects on my own positionality and the ascribed roles within the research field. The final part discusses the practical organization of the fieldwork environment where I conducted my research.

Building on this foundation, the subsequent section will focus on ethnographic approaches to understanding how law is transformed in practice, highlighting the ways in which legal change intersects with morality and normative behavior.

2.2 Ethnography and the Transformation of Law

Didier Fassin's works on humanitarianism and morality (2007; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2017) form a fundamental part of the theoretical framework I utilize to examine international aid. I discuss Fassin's critique of the concept of impartiality in international humanitarianism, particularly concerning the recognition of human suffering and the breakdown of relationships.

Reciprocal relations manifest as broader modern ties of gift exchange, which underpin the ideas of altruism and humanitarianism. I adapt these concepts to empirical data, revealing a humanitarian shift in NGO operations and donor-NGO relationships. Understanding Fassin's criticism requires an examination of the concepts of value systems, normative orders, and standardized rule systems.

Fassin's contributions were salient and groundbreaking within the discipline of moral anthropology. According to Fassin, who draws on Kantian philosophy (which considers a humanistic, universalist perspective rather than one of cultural relativism as it is understood by Boas) moral anthropology is considered "a tool for the implementation of morals to human beings." (Fassin 2012: 1) Or, to put it simply: by bringing anthropology focused on morality, Fassin examines applied practices and the behavior of given moral laws. Bringing German

sociologist Max Weber's (1949) point of view to the discussion of empirical scientific disciplines does not aim to convey norms and ideological models, which would shed light on people's general behavior and confirm the action in practice. Instead, the point is to analyze norms and moral perception as they are experienced and negotiated in a situational context, given the specific contextual circumstances. Weber believes that this should not stop empirical science from researching moral habits and the background of criticism and transformations in the way those habits are enacted. The values' critique, rooted in judgmental behavior, should be considered against the backdrop of subjective observations of empirical practices (Weber 1949). What should be of greater importance is what can be drawn from academia's contributions to a critique of the value system. Moral anthropology does not seek to impose a particular value system, nor does it position itself at one of the two poles mentioned earlier—that is, those of Boas and Kant. Fassin (2012: 2) regards morality as an object for research like any other. French anthropologist Emile Durkheim observed the phenomenon of "moral facts", which can appear either profane or mundane (Durkheim 1984: XXV [1893]). Along with this "objectification" of the subject of morality, this research field needs to situate concerns, boundaries, tensions, and constraints within space and time. Empirical research aims at contributing to theoretical knowledge, which finds answers in the empirical practices of morality and ethics as they are applied by and within society. Such representation is connected to normativity, which derives from moral and ethical perceptions. The approach favors the production of knowledge that helps reform and even transform societal conditions passing judgment on the status quo.

Law has been an object of research since the early beginnings of ethnographic fieldwork; I will elaborate on this later. Currently, law plays a central role in the context of states and state actors. In this context, the law is as a process that solidifies and reifies through structuring. However, it is increasingly non-state actors that drive changes in the law, through their lobbying and public relations work. However, it is increasingly non-state actors that drive changes in the law, through their lobbying and public relations work. Here I mean not only national law, but also forms of law such as international agreements, treaties, and normative provisions, which also includes humanitarian and developmental practices and politics. It is for this reason that I mention the triangle of normativity, law, and morality (in the sense of international humanitarianism) in the introduction.

In my research question, I am interested in the process of rights transformation in the work of NGOs and its situational negotiation in the practices of participants. Following Anthony Giddens's (1984) perspective on society's structure, it seems relevant to examine structures not only for their theoretical validity but how they are reflected in practice. Following this train of thought, I consider social practices of law an opportunity to analyze particular cultural settings which overlap and entangle with each other, since law imbues all social strata (Benda-Beckmann 2002). Law expresses ideas and values, leading to normativity and moralities.

I analyze the processualization of legal transformation and apply the translatory procedures of women's rights on the domestic, transnational, and international scales of politics on development that takes place in Lebanon. Legal women's rights activism highlights claim-making processes while dealing with and articulating social problems. Therefore, ethnography is the appropriate research program, in which to examine these issues. Ethnography is composed of different data generation methods (such as participant observations, interviews, photographs, etc.) and different data format results, but which I evaluate in a unified coding system.

By processualization, I mean a gradual, evolving process that allows a structure to solidify situationally through sequences which are recurring, ritualized, and practiced. Actors rehearse structures and negotiate them situationally. Structures, therefore, do not only serve themselves.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1926) had already explored legal mobilization when he talked about judicial machinery in litigation procedures. Mobilization means activating any resources, be they human, non-human, technological, or material, leading to movement and social practice. Mobilizing can even be synonymous with early interventionist action or intervention in general. The mobilization of rights, or "rights mobilization", is understood as all processes necessary to interfere in decision-making procedures, whether they are policy or legislative. Rights (discourse) movements manifest themselves as legal mobilization or rights activism. Legal rights action is based on the law in action or rights in action (Travers and Manzo 1997; Scheffer 2006), leading to a further understanding of how public legal consciousness is manifested in courtroom proceedings. I differentiate between the women's rights campaigning done in Lebanon in political domains, institutional relations and settings, and the street. I argue that legal mobilization uses the law for social change.

Rights politics, with its struggles for justice, falls under the heading of legal mobilization. Legal mobilizations are part of micropolitics and as such, they reveal the ways legality is structured and functions in local politics. Such legal mobilizations refer to a massive, international, and even global structure and system. Various actors can use legal mobilization to interfere with lawmaking procedures. Political theorist Donald Black regards "law" as a broad term that encompasses any form of governmental social control: "Without mobilization of the law, a central legal system lies out of touch with the human problems it is designed to oversee. Mobilization is the link between the law and the people served or controlled by the law" (Black 1973: 126).

Having explored the processes of legal transformation and the entanglement of law with moral and normative frameworks, it is equally essential to consider how these moral dimensions are approached within the ethnographic research itself. Ethnography, as a discipline, inherently involves moral and ethical considerations, from the positionality of the researcher to the representation of social realities.

2.2.1 Morality in Ethnography and Ethnographic Fieldwork

This chapter section discusses ethnography's role as a discipline itself related to moral and ethical behavior, value systems, and ideologies. Ethnography and ethnographic fieldwork, in particular, have always been biased by contemporary settings, facts, approaches, intentions, politics, research interests, and actors. The relationality and subjective experience of the ethnographer influence the research design. These thoughts shall not end in a fundamental critique of ethnographic research designs or an apology for conducting research.

Ethnography always entails personal involvement and therefore presents a selective version of reality (Fassin 2017). Such representations emerge from decisions and choices the ethnographer makes while she accesses, experiences, and observes the field. The researcher, along with her readers, might find herself immersed in the context of the narration, appearing as a subject. Ethnographers act as transmitters, as they live and spend time in a given local context, which they get to know through daily lived experience. They engage with people and their social behavior, overall structural order, norms, and commonalities. Such interactions enable further analysis and are part of the researcher's study and interests. Ethnographers

draw upon them when they finally produce research data, which are interpreted through a thick description of the social actions researchers deem essential to represent. It is important to acknowledge that the background of the researcher herself (meaning education, class, gender, and race) impacts the interpretation of the data itself. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1988) accentuates the importance of conditioned knowledge gained in specific situations. At this moment, it is necessary to acknowledge that objectivity is situated and does not reveal a full and transparent truth. Knowing objects should not be regarded as a field projection but as an agent, representing a partial knowledge position. In this regard, Haraway (1988: 583) further states, "not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only a partial perspective promises objective vision." The location of objectivity, that is, the act of locating, needs to be part of the research procedure. It enables the discovery of the blind spots in scientific research reproduction. The fieldwork findings are shaped and determined by ideology, research interests and intentions, and the place of origin or reference within academia or the discipline itself. Such a motive leads to the concept of positionality, which has its relevance in ethnography and the researcher's reflections. It requires our attention beyond our individual or subjective selves. It is neither about self-exploration and rational reflection while travelling nor about self-pitying and self-justifying thoughts. It is instead a poignant reflection of methods used while living abroad, experiencing encounters with the other, and living as a different version of yourself during research. Being on fieldwork anticipates conducting empirical academic work even during leisure time. Again, to put it simply: While on fieldwork, being and interacting with people leads to a deeper understanding and interpretation of the othering experience. One's own positionality is therefore not only a single, self-oriented consideration of experiences but also a daily experience of negotiating cultural beliefs and behavior within an "othering" society. Therefore, the researcher's subjective perception is no longer individually motivated and *a posteriori* (Ricoeur 1992). I argue that the subjective perception is a constant, dynamic negotiation of intersubjectivity, all developed and conceived by dialogue between people and their interactions).

The understanding of the notions of "fieldwork" and "ethnography" within the discipline of anthropology has made enormous leaps in the last two centuries, evolutionary approaches that clearly distinguished the West from "primitive" cultures, especially those

exclusionary, emic cultures outside of the West, were in fashion in anthropology. Western concepts of cultures and societies, along with evolutionism, assumed that those cultures were "underdeveloped" and needed to be "improved" according to Western standards. Bronislaw Malinowski paved the way for a new methodological approach as central to ethnographic research. He figures as one of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century, particularly in British social anthropology. The "founding father" of ethnographic research argued, with his famous opus on the Trobriand Islands and the "Kula trade-off" (1922), for extensive fieldwork and research stays. Closer, more intimate encounters with informants, along with a deeper understanding of cultural and societal commodities and the environmental, economic circumstances should intensify the knowledge of a culture that can be gained in a specific context. Malinowski's opus represents one of the first monographs describing daily life practices and social interactions among the people on the Trobriand Islands through participant observation and direct, "real" interaction with locals. Malinowski gathered "real" data, which brought up issues of conflict, sexuality, economy, and religion, contextualized according to the colonial setting in which he was writing. Critiques of Malinowski's romanticized and very "primitive" ethnographic representation of Trobriand Islands culture increased within anthropology. Such opinions criticized the thin and one-sided description of the culture, which was isolated and separated from any external influences, and therefore argued for a more interpretative and thick description of the culture. Malinowski's text might be outdated, but the legacy of his ideas is not an outdated experience for people in countries anthropologist usually choose as fieldsites. The Manchester School entrenched in the discipline a process-oriented approach with a focus on social situations. The Manchester School was erected between 1950 and 1970 at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in present-day Zambia, then known as Northern Rhodesia (Barnard 2000: 85-86). Its new approach, the "extended case method" (Barnard 2000: 85-86), reflected everyday life's conflicts and social transformations. Their research area was the Copperbelt, with its various working migrants. They researched what anthropologists today call "ethnicity" in the behavior of the ethnic groups which congregated in the Copperbelt. The Manchester School took a critical stance on British colonialism and redeemed Malinowski's functionalism with its process-centered, social actions-oriented approach. In this regard, it was a pioneering incorporation. Overall, systemic factors got into analysis rather than only looking at localized, related issues. (Barnard 2000: 84-87).

Two renowned researchers emerged from the Manchester School: Max Gluckman and Victor Turner, who both influenced subsequent researchers. While Gluckman explored customary practices and social behavior (1955; 1965), Turner looked at how ruptures in social structures are performed through rituals (1967). He became famous when he expanded Arnold van Gennep's concept of *rite de passage* (1960 [1909]), an analysis of the social drama through the actions that people perform. Apparent, deliberate ruptures of social norms lead to crisis and conflict. They are redistributed and reordered through the rituals which are performed within a society and which are part of the life cycle and context of that society. A Marxist perspective considers procedure and action a product of social relations (Barnard 2000, 87). Although Marxism has its roots in functionalism, it conceives of systems not as rigid, essentialized entities, but as those which can change. Such transformation occurs through a revolutionary change (Barnard 2000, 87). Marxism is further linked with poststructuralist and postmodernist notions of power relations and dependencies (Barnard 2000, 81). Marxists and postmodern relativists make for an atypical alliance, as they share mutual interests in themes such as power, oppression, and global politico-economic relations (Barnard 2000, 88-89). American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's work on the Balinese cockfight (1973) marked an important turn toward doing ethnographic fieldwork and introduced a different shift toward doing ethnographic fieldwork and introducing a different ethnographic method, namely, *thick description*. In his work, Geertz depicts cockfighting in Bali as a traditional, social event and analyzes and interprets the structure and meanings of this fight concerning social relations and culture. His thick interpretations of the vividly described contest between two cocks sheds light on how Balinese values, cosmology, (conflicting) social behaviors, and discourses are established and negotiated. Another significant step in anthropology's ethnographic turn established both George Marcus and James Clifford in the 1980s, when anthropology suffered from a "crisis of representation". Their controversial, co-edited work *Writing Culture* (1986) sparked broad debate on ethnography's politics and writing style within the discipline of anthropology. The polarizing debate triggered discussions on issues of (post)colonialism, the researcher's own positionality, the dichotomy between objects and subjects, and global world politics and economics. It also sparked a dispute around the conceptualization of culture in terms of othering and self-reference. Most importantly, and essential for my ethnographic approach, Marcus (1995) invented new ethnographic methods by introducing a field site format; instead of a single, spatially- and geographically circumscribed place where fieldwork

should take place, the author speaks of multiple field sites. Objects, goods, and means increasingly circulate between places in times of globalization and globalized economies, particularly if research focuses on transnational processes and movements. Ethnographic research needs to take place in spaces in various locations. Such a design for ethnographic research can also negatively impact data gathering, as one cannot dive into one site in-depth. Furthermore, I suggest that managing and getting to know several field sites can be challenging due to time restrictions and limited access. Lila Abu Lughod (2000) developed Marcus' reflections on multi-sited ethnography by analyzing fieldwork sites that, at the time, were considered "unconventional"—she herself used the media as a site as well as looking at how those researching global, transnational phenomena located such sites. While looking at the locality of fieldsites, Marcus examines the socially constructed "space" of *fieldsite*, where generating knowledge production, a chain of translation and circulation, and distinctions between class, gender, ethnicity, and religion play a significant role. For Marcus, multi-sited ethnography is an imaginary ethnographic representation of a globalized "world system" (Lippman Abu Lughod 1991, 1995), where hegemonic (power) structures, discourses, and politics influence the research agenda, the researcher, her audience, and academia. Abu Lughod therefore has a more inclusive perspective about the researcher's subjectivity. The notions of field and fieldwork are products of a debate on the shift in writing culture in anthropology. Furthermore, these anthropological categories are part of a permanent change in ethnographic practice and theory due to developments and transformations on political, legal, social, and global levels, as well as shifts in research interests within academia. Feminist scholars, such as Abu Lughod (2002), insist on including more feminist theories within ethnographic writing and representing alternative voices and norms through ethnography.

A general way of describing this is that anthropology and discourses of othering discuss and focus on differences, to what extent anthropology can be relativistic. Abu Lughod (2002) urged an awareness of the other's connectedness with the primarily global feminist movement. She also calls for broader recognition of a point of reference anthropologists do have: an anthropologist needs to consider what cultural contexts demand her knowledge and what the audience wants to know about a specific issue. Feminist theory promotes an abolishment of binaries and dichotomies in worldview. Furthermore, it discusses objectivity, knowledge acquisition, and representation, in addition to tackling power asymmetries. Critical ethnography after anthropologist Soyini Madison (2012) considers how an ethnographer

should reflect upon her research intentions and whether she might cause harm to the people involved even though her intentions were good. Her analytical claim is that research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the local context that is described and how its representation could shed light on issues with broader implications for the coherence of justice, politics, power and economy. I assume that ethnographers usually research in fields where the status quo represents an impulse that needs to be transformed through, for example, a social movement or alternative norms, ideas, and notions of law.

Building on the prior discussion of morality and the relational nature of ethnographic representation, it is crucial to foreground the role of subjectivity and positionality in shaping ethnographic knowledge. As anthropologists navigate the delicate interplay of their own identities, experiences, and power dynamics within the field, their capacities for self-reflection and reflexivity become central to understanding how knowledge is produced and contextualized.

2.2.2 Subjectivity and Positionalities as Key Concepts

I argue that anthropologists' capacities and roles are in constant motion during fieldwork. They move in and out of the field; they shift among multiple identities during the academic, field, and work stages. Through such a continuous and fluid change of intersubjective practice and encounters, various voices and roles surface and are part of the holistic process of ethnographic research. Fieldwork integrates these different aspects of movement. In the field, these many voices and roles take the form of internal discussions and discourses, external negotiations over definitions, and descriptions of research borders in conformity with an imagined professional community. Process-oriented questions about "when" and "how" are a specific focus of anthropology. Ideally, these questions help one understand something in the ethnographic data that one otherwise would not. Moreover, such an analysis should make it possible to connect a case study to the systemic whole. To do this, these questions engage with a more quantifiable point: "to what extent".

Anthropologist Joel Robbins (2007, 2015) speaks of "cultural representations", when examples on culture shed light on overarching, holistic systems and generate general assumptions about structure and function. For Robbins, representations are symbols created by processes, logics, and values around the organization of social life. Applying Robbins'

concept to my research, my fieldwork serves as a cultural representation of institutionalism and ethnographic research, in which I explore knowledge production among changing multi-level networks. It questions definitions and categories of what an object is, how we define others by knowing even more about ourselves, and how we conceptualize subjectivity and objectivity if we want to speak from our own position, not for others but about or through them. This research strives to show how we come to understand the significance of moral behaviors.

Ethnography is an empirical method (and therefore one that works "on the ground" or with that what exists "on the ground") that has a long tradition and history of opposing the evaluation and verification of facts. It is not the ethnographer's job to judge whether the status quo she researches is just or not. Ethnography must remain grounded in empirical data from the worlds of others. There is no systematic or impartial, neutral standpoint that can be completely free of subjectivity, ideology or 'collections' of affects (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2008; Nail 2017). In communication scientist Aimee Carrillo Rowe's words, "We are always inseparable from the theory we create. The theory we create allows us to live in new and juster ways. Our homework is to examine these connections—between self and community, between community and theory, between theory and justice" (2005: 17). Ethnographers' ethical responsibility rises to the level of showing compassion for people, their living conditions, their freedom and principles, and their suffering. They should remember their own backgrounds and whether they come from a region with a history of colonialism, imperialism or occupation. An ethnographer should describe a setting in meticulous detail, representing it from her own point of view—including her interpretations, based on observations, interactions, and dialogues—and therefore with the researcher's self-reflexive background and intentions. Considerations of background should amplify the researcher's intellectual capacity to write about the power of knowledge a researcher has to write about a specific cultural context. Therefore, finding or seeking the boundaries between opportunities and alternatives should always be a prior skill an ethnographer tries to show within or with her work. According to ethnographer Harold Goodall (2000), ethnography should also contain criticism of subjectivity as well as objectivity. From the very start, a sense of understanding, and the ability to understand processes and procedures while analyzing and interpreting them formed the core of my reflection on approaches to methodological research. This gradual way of understanding is not linear and might often proceed be deferred – both in space and time.

In addition to the nonlinear connectivity of comprehension and the understanding of data, knowledge of context and situation also often comes into play later on. Therefore, difficulties emerge in locating new data, causing a tendency to place them immediately in my own value system.

To illustrate the practical side of ethnography, this section describes the typical day in the field, emphasizing the contextual, ethical, and personal dimensions involved in conducting research.

2.3 A Taxi Ride Through My Fieldwork

The following section outlines the daily routine of the ethnographer—myself—during fieldwork and mapping activities. It describes how I engage with and shape the field site by exploring its physical, socio-cultural, and political environments. At the same time, it highlights topics such as history, discourse, ethnographic experience, and subjectivity, all of which are relevant to both the research project and the process of field creation. The paragraph sheds light on the following challenges:

- defining and accessing the field (or fields) while in it
- collecting and generating data
- positioning oneself as a researcher
- reflecting upon ethical and moral values within fieldwork and anthropology

To bring these reflections to life and illustrate the tangible realities of navigating the field, I now turn to a personal vignette—a typical "daily journey"—that captures the nuances of everyday fieldwork, including its physical, social, and ethical dimensions.

A Daily Journey

// I had to find public transport that would bring me from *Achrafieh* to *Hamra*, from east to west; from a quiet, residential, mostly Christian neighborhood to a vibrant, and chaotic mixed Muslim and Christian one. The NGO where I was, for research

purposes, doing an internship was in the latter area. The sun burned down mercilessly on the tiny caravan of stop-and-go traffic. The din of honking cars and the almost unbearable smell of garbage overflowing from containers that the government hadn't emptied in weeks underlined the stressful, unpleasant atmosphere in which I waited for a shared taxi, or *Service*. While I was waiting, almost in the middle of the street because of the parked cars blocking the sidewalks, my gaze fell on a giant poster fixed to a pole. The poster was part of a publicity campaign, but not an ordinary commercial campaign, the likes of which one would often find in public spaces along more prominent streets. Instead, the poster depicted a young girl as a bride with a white dress and a wedding veil. Her big brown eyes looked sad. A banner at the height of her tiny body read, in Arabic and, below it, English, "Raise the Age". In the English version, the *s* in the word *raise* twisted itself into the number 8. The *i* preceding it suggested a 1, hinting at the campaign's demand for a legal marriage age of 18. The poster belonged to a famous local women's rights NGO that I was familiar with. However, I was still surprised to see such a campaign poster in public, one which promoted women's rights through a sensitive social topic.

It was hot outside, so of course I struggled to find a *Service*—or at least one whose driver would be willing to take me to the east side of town during rush hour without charging an exorbitant extra price because I wasn't Lebanese. However, I was persistent, waiting for more than 15 minutes before I found a driver who would take me to my destination without endless negotiation. I had hardly climbed into the backseat of the old, rattling Mercedes, which was battered from his golden years in the 1960s, before the driver, corpulent and bald, offered me a cigarette. With his thick fingers, a ring on each of them, he handed me a pack of local cigarettes emblazoned with a cedar tree, the national emblem. Opening the conversation, he asked, "Are you French? " I refused the cigarettes gently, then finally let myself fall back into the soft, worn leather of the backseat

and roll the window down. "No, Swiss," I responded. His eyes widened, and my answer seemed to make the corners of his mouth twitch. "Oh, you are the first Swiss woman sitting in my taxi. Welcome, welcome. It is hot today and lots of traffic." I nodded. He fixed his eyes on me through the rearview mirror and asked, "Are you working in Lebanon?" I had a strong idea where the conversation was leading, but I answered his question anyway. "Yes, I am." "Ah," he muttered. He stroked his jaw. "Do you work in an NGO? Human rights?" Again, I replied in the affirmative. A young, dark-haired soldier in a military uniform waved his hand impatiently, signaling at us to cross the intersection.

"You are lucky that you found someone to drive you to *Hamra* at this time. There is terrible traffic right now, and the fuel is costly these days, tough life now." Again, I nodded without involving myself too much in the conversation. I had heard these sentences very often and I didn't know how to react.

The driver wouldn't give up on the one-way conversation, asking, "Are you married?" We passed a bunch of men coming from a closed construction site. Suddenly, the supposedly friendly *Service* driver snorted audibly, squinting and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He now seemed more interested in these men than he was in questioning me about my private life. "You see them? They are Syrians, dirty Syrians. They are dangerous and taking our jobs. The city is not safe any longer. Lebanon is not safe any longer. Because of them. Furthermore, the United Nations is giving them money. You are giving them money, you foreigners. What about us? We have been hosting them for almost five years! I cannot buy fuel [with] human rights!"
//¹¹

After describing the routines and challenges of daily fieldwork, the focus shifts to the negotiation of my own positionality. This part examines how my identity and the roles I

¹¹ Extract from field notes, 8.8. 2016.

occupied affected my engagement with local informants, illustrating the dynamic and situational nature of positionality in ethnographic practice.

2.3.1 Negotiating Positionality and Field

In this section, I clarify the roles assigned to me, the roles which were assigned to me, and which I had to negotiate, in my interactions with local experts. This shows my informants' reactions to my research topic and the situationality I encountered, especially in relation to the discourse on the dichotomy between East and West, the prejudice against the non-West and the concept of Orientalism. My field notes clearly indicate that my positionality was a Western, European white woman, which shaped the way local experts engaged with me.

// Two-thirds of the way through my fieldwork, I had an appointment with a sociologist working at a Lebanese University. We had been introduced to one another by a mutual colleague and had already exchanged. We had already exchanged some emails, in which I explained my overall research topic and why I thought I would benefit from her particular knowledge and expertise. We met in her office, and when we finished the small talk and introductions, we moved on to my research interests and our meeting's objectives. Throughout the meeting, I felt in an inferior position, as I was having a chat with an expert. She was from Lebanon. She was more knowledgeable about the local context, where I was doing my research. She knew more activists, scholars, ongoing debates, and arguments about domestic and regional politics. As we were approaching the end of our meeting, she said, "Your research idea is very Western and liberal, it is hardly applicable in our context. All these human rights approaches. You have to be aware that we are not a democracy here in the sense that Western countries might understand it. Ask people on the street about human rights, distribute a questionnaire to my students. I guarantee you that the answers will be the same. Everyone people will laugh when you start

talking about human rights." When I was leaving, she said, "I hope that you are making something out of your stay here, unlike the usual foreigners coming here, doing their research, and going back while taking nothing from the experience—no lessons learned, no insights on how life looks. On the contrary, they reproduce Western notions about us, about our culture, Lebanon, and the Middle East. I am telling you; we are the experts sitting here. I hope you take advantage of it." //¹²

This was not the only time local experts probed my research question, framed as it was by Western standards and ideas from academics and other experts. I noticed that the universality of this understanding of human rights was often questioned, as it is too tailored to European standards and thus neglects local perspectives and methods for implementing universal rights. Human rights and the discourse around them are imposed, with no consideration given to local conditions, practices, and implementations. Beyond this critique, I was also criticized for the way Western politics do harm on several levels in the Middle East region and for perpetuating colonial politics through imperialist economic and political interests and partial implementation and enforcement of human rights in the region.

As my ethnographic data would show, the academic mentioned above was right when it came to people's reactions, on the streets or in informal settings, when I ask them what they thought about human rights. Often people hesitated, appeared bewildered, raised their eyebrows, and eyeballed me, half amused, half annoyed. They often started laughing and waved me aside, saying something like, "Human rights? Here in Lebanon? What rights?" or "Women's rights! Here you have work, much work!"

Another excerpt from a field note about a conversation with a local expert, this time with a male lawyer and gender expert, shows how different role attributions are presented in relation to each other. The first conversation was about scientific reproduction and the Western view on the universality claim of human rights; in it, the participants had to work off each other. The following conversation is about cultural difference in the comparison of women and political and regional comparisons on which role attributions are worked off.

¹² Extract from field notes, 8.8.2016.

"Human rights? You Western people, you are coming here and accusing us of human rights abuse and misbehavior. You are bringing your human rights here attempting to stamp down our cultural beliefs. Do first your homework. What about the occupation and human rights violations in Palestine? Are you accusing them [Israeli state] for human rights violations as well? Hypocrite, you [the West] are a hypocrite! You [Westerners] treat us [the Arabs, the Arab World] as second-class citizens; you are more concerned about animal welfare than what is happening to the people south of us for over seven decades. Over six years in our other neighboring country Syria. [...] Furthermore, look at you; you would have been treated and have gotten access differently if you would look differently. [...] Women in Lebanon, Lebanese women are male accessories, and they are second-class citizens with limited rights. [...] You are aware of how men are looking at you, a foreign woman? Easy and cheap, they think you are easy and cheap."¹³

Such experiences show the complex dynamics and tensions that become visible in the field and form the basis for an in-depth analysis of the existing attributions of power and roles. These diverse experiences and the associated negotiation processes highlight the need for a systematic approach to organizing the research process. In the following chapter, I will explain how I organized my field project to ensure that the insights gained were recorded and reflected upon in a methodologically sound manner.

2.4 Organizing the Field

This chapter is about how I organized my field research while in the field. First, I discuss the three stages into which I divided my research. In each stage, I was assigned a different role, either by others or by circumstances in the field itself. In the first two stages, I was assigned the roles of first an intern and second a gender expert; in the third and last stage, I positioned myself as a "floating ethnographer". Second, I describe how I established networks and points of access to the field. Third, I concentrate on other perspectives and settings to get the most versatile perspective on the field. Fourth, I take a closer look at my data analysis methods. In doing so, I look at how I consistently collected, analyzed, and formatted data. I also describe precisely how I anonymized my data.

¹³ Interview transcript extract, Beirut, June 9, 2017.

2.4.1 Conducting Fieldwork in Three Stages

My fieldwork took place over 12 months, from April 2016 until June 2017, with an interruption of fieldwork in Lebanon in January and February 2017. The fieldwork was separated into three phases. Every phase lasted four months. In the first phase, I did two months of explorative fieldwork while at the same time working as an intern in a local women's rights NGO for the entire four months. I also had a mandate from an international agency. This helped me to map, locate, and identify NGOs and initiatives and establish a solid network of activists, NGO employees, lawyers, and scholars. In the second phase, I was mainly independent, meaning that I did not work within an institution. While I looked for another organization to work for, possibly one on an international level, that did not work out. I was unable to find a vacant research position in a similar setting to that of the local NGO, which would have allowed me to compare the experiences and observations I took from each. However, this second phase allowed me to attend conferences on different scales, maintain networks, and keep in touch with gatekeepers and informants. It also helped me redefine and reflect on my theoretical framework and research question, as well as giving me time to consider what data I still wished to acquire and at which fieldsites. In the third and last phase, I conducted my own interviews, as by then I had a solid overview of the network and people knew me.

As I mentioned already, my field research proceeded in three methodical stages. These three stages suggest my positionality in the field and the reciprocal relationship I had with the environment. Using membership roles in field research, Peter and Patricia Adler (1987) demonstrate that a contextual role can vary depending on attribution and point of view. Membership and the growing recognition of *raison d'être* in the field that is associated with it create trust within a group. As a result, group members notice interaction patterns and skills of a new member, which helps them better assess the person. Another component comes into play for an ethnographer—namely, her participatory involvement and observational role. According to Adler and Adler (1987), one is always a participant, but sometimes one's involvement is strong and sometimes it is weak (Breidenstein et al. 2013), and it can certainly change according to the situation. This means that, depending on the situation, the observational role can be more vital than the participatory one. At times, one is more participant-observer; at others, an observing participant. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I had the role of intern at PCA—a field role, as the NGO had interns before and after me. As an

intern, I initially made coffee and watched the staff do their jobs, and I also got to look up and follow up on many documents. In ethnographic research, it is imperative to try to be discreet and overt at the same time (Preiser 2016). In the field as an intern, staying discreet meant (among other things) that my ideas about my role in the field did not necessarily match the role I was initially given. I was often not kept informed and sometimes even forgotten; I almost had to force my colleagues to hear and involve me. The constant questions that Rima¹⁴ and especially Lama had to endure from me annoyed them but posing them was the only way to get more involved in what was going on and to better understand procedures and rationales. I established myself as part of the office routine and my specific competencies were recognized. I became more a part of PCA and its institutional life. I attended board meetings and meetings with partner organizations, I helped organize a workshop, and I was involved in a project's evaluation process. In addition to these tasks, I also helped revise and design protocols, in-house research papers, and reports sent to donors.

In the second phase, I became part of the peacebuilding and human rights unit of an international institution that funds human rights projects and humanitarian aid and would like to expand its portfolio to include projects related to gender. As the only female researcher in this work environment, I was quickly presented as a gender expert, especially to partner organizations and institutions. However, my work resembled, albeit with greater engagement, the tasks I was fortunate to undertake as an intern at PCA—namely, assisting with and supporting administrative, organizational, and bureaucratic activities. This work experience and the access it afforded helped me map, locate, and identify NGOs and initiatives, as well as establish a reliable network of activists, NGO employees, lawyers, and scholars.

In the third and final phase of my fieldwork, I took on the role of, as I called it, "floating ethnographer", meaning that I had no direct role ascribed to me by the field. I was not bound to any institution in the field. I therefore had no institutional background and was thus able to navigate between the different fields of work based on my field research without explicitly positioning myself. I was well integrated in the field by then and had established good access, but I was less involved and observed more.

¹⁴ Rima is an employee at the Lebanese NGO where I was conducting fieldwork (April-August 2016) while doing an internship. During the internship, she was responsible for my work tasks and acted as a mentor to me.

These multiple perspectives (making coffee vs. being a gender expert) and a changing perspective on the same endeavor—women's NGOs' efforts to strengthen women's rights through law change in the field—are an anthropological, scientific contribution that was possible through my choice of ethnography as a research program.

I have documented an in-depth look at my approach, detailing how I navigated the field and gained access to informants and data. Let me now give a brief overview of the local context of Beirut, which has unique characteristics, especially in relation to international aid.

The Lebanese capital Beirut is located on the Mediterranean Sea and has a population of around 2.5 million, more than half of whom live in the city or its urban neighborhood.

The country shares borders with Syria and Israel and is characterized by tense relations due to both regional conflicts and the history of occupation. The security situation, combined with Lebanon's strategic location as a transit zone between Europe and Asia, allows Beirut to serve as a regional hub for international agencies and organizations. This hub is characterized by knowledge production and expertise, with NGOs focusing on service provision, capacity building, training and rights-based advocacy as key components of their agendas. Many of these organizations provide services to some two million Syrian refugees, in addition to the long-standing Palestinian refugees who have been living in camps around Beirut for decades. Furthermore, strong kinship structures and family patterns overlap with existing territorial and state borders, leading to complex dynamics between Syria, Israel, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

2.4.2 Accessing the Field and Becoming Part of a Network

I will now discuss how I accessed the field in practice. A senior researcher at Freie Universität in Berlin connected me with a researcher with Lebanese origins based in London. We did not meet in person, preferring to communicate via email. She named some NGOs she knew in Lebanon with their headquarters in Beirut. I then wrote to those that had a contact email listed on their websites, explaining my academic background and research intentions, and applying for unpaid internships. I chose to be as transparent as possible, so as not to violate AAA's ethical guidelines (Harper and Corsin 2005; AAA 2009) and follow the ethical and moral principles for doing fieldwork I learned through my studies and in my PhD program. Few NGOs replied to me, and only one responded positively to my application. I would later spend

four months as an intern at this NGO; its internal structure and institutional work would be the ones that I would draw upon for pieces of my analysis and build on in my data and field. The researcher from Lebanon also mentioned a researcher I should contact that taught at the American University of Beirut. Just like that, I was able to get a foot in the door at an academic environment in Lebanon which could help me access the field before switching to the NGO setting once I arrived in my fieldsite¹⁵. With time, I became part of a network too, and it was crucial to share contacts and information with time to become relevant to people in the field. Once I started the internship, I was introduced to people, organizations, and groups at universities, embassies, international organizations, activist groups, and local groups following the snowball effect. People told me the names of people or referred to them. I search for people, or I looked organizations up (mostly via their Facebook or Twitter account or website). After that I contacted them via email, I called them, or I even visited them.

In her famous book *The Network Inside Out* (2000) I found deep resonance with Anneliese Riles' exploration of documentation and paperwork, as she articulates how these often-overlooked artefacts are essential elements in the broader social fabric. Riles' emphasis on the repetitive nature of documents revealed to me that this repetition is not just a bureaucratic formality but is fundamentally intertwined with the systems that govern our interactions. My fieldwork in Beirut, Lebanon, which focused on women's rights, made this even clearer. I observed how women's NGOs operate within these networks, where the documentation they produce not only reflects their activities, but also plays a crucial role in shaping their identity and influence within a larger socio-political context. Understanding this connection reinforced my belief that paperwork and its consistent reproduction are important components of the systemic structures within which these organizations operate, ultimately affecting their capacity for advocacy and transformation.

2.4.3 Including Versatile Sites and Perspectives

As previously mentioned, I did most of my fieldwork in Lebanon's capital, Beirut. I want to add here that the women's rights and NGO scenes in Lebanon are relatively small and

¹⁵ In this thesis, I define *fieldsite* as the entire array of different spaces and places where my research took place. I define *field* as a single, concrete space or place where I conducted thorough fieldwork. Therefore, I researched in several fields but only one fieldsite.

manageable, mainly condensed in and limited to the international hotspot that is Beirut. However, I also did fieldwork in two other larger cities, Tripoli (in the north) and Tyre (in the south), as well as rural areas in the Chouf region and the Bekaa valley. The spaces of my field site consisted of the offices of national, transnational, international, and local academic, non-governmental, semi-governmental, and grassroots-based institutions, and organizations. I also attended several hearings of a Shia family court in a village in the Bekaa valley, where I observed divorce litigation. Furthermore, I tried to map the setting in which women's rights and activism in Beirut take place; to this end, I visited several NGOs. The meetings and visits with institutions and organizations were scheduled in advance due to their employees' tight schedules. In general, my initial contact started with either a phone call or an email introducing myself and my project intentions.

During my fieldwork, I conducted participant observation in international, domestic, and local NGO settings, to research NGOs' culture of documentation, bureaucratization, and knowledge production in activism and advocacy around gender and women's rights. Women's rights activism takes place in a wide range of transnational networks, which I located and mapped before engaging with and exploring. I often visited NGOs offices spontaneously and without an appointment because I hadn't heard anything from them over mail. I did not record such encounters, and they did not follow an interview-guided structure. These encounters served as gatekeeping opportunities, ones which allowed to present my research in person and see whether there was mutual interest in and reciprocal benefits to collaborating in the future.

It happened several times that people referred me to other sources in terms of networks, informants, people, events, organizations, and institutions. I met these people through friends or word of mouth in networks I was already known in. Following an initial meeting, I often met them in informal settings, such as over lunch or a drink in a restaurant in Beirut. I got to know activists from different generations who actively participated in the women's rights movement. If I was unable to meet them at their workplaces, I did so in coffee shops. I also participated in events put on by grassroots groups such as collectives, associations, and university clubs that dealt with women's rights issues. I attended conferences and events on gender and legal issues, both at universities and in international NGO fora; I accompanied one NGO when it held a workshop on women's empowerment for women in rural areas of the Chouf region. When it came to international organizations, I also

had a mandate on gender projects from an international agency which allowed me to attend meetings with partner organizations, politicians, and colleagues from other international agencies working in the same field. During this phase, I used to translate project applications into the formats required by international agencies, whose committees in Europe would need to approve them during the prior quarter.

Throughout my fieldwork, I analyzed rights-based campaigns taking place in Lebanon. Two-thirds of the way through my stay, I decided to observe two campaigns more thoroughly, which serve as case studies. The research for these case studies included expert interviews with people who had led NGO campaigns such as directors, NGO employees, and campaign leaders, as well as donors, international and local partners, activists, religious leaders, and lawyers. I attended actions, events, and marches which advocated women's rights and amendments to the law.

I used all these occasions and events for participant observation and to assess the value of the following matters: Firstly, the documentation of knowledge production; that is, how NGOs as brokers between project donors and target groups alter, reproduce, and distribute such knowledge. Secondly, the bureaucratic procedures of transformation, which are meant to end in successful project implementation. Securing a project's funding and then keeping it going in the long-term requires constant assessment, evaluation, and auditing. These processes are manifested in written documents, accompanied by meetings and exchanges between donors and project facilitators. Lastly, the networks and settings in which NGOs operate and are successful.

2.4.4 Data Evaluation Method

Data Generation and Format

I now come to the question of how I generated my data and what formats I chose. In addition to interviews as self-produced data, I collected observation protocols, diaries, and photographs for my research. The social media posts, campaign texts, and NGO documents such as internal reports, external evaluations, and campaign texts were produced by third parties and existed independently from my research. I used them as data, always departing first from my field protocols. My self-produced data was collected during the fieldwork period

of 2016–2017. In addition, I constantly archived social media posts about my field that I integrated into my data at later stages of the research process.

I conducted expert interviews with actors within international development and local and transnational women's rights movements and activism. The interviews took place either in the interviewees' offices or workplaces or in public places, suggested by the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured. I had prepared an interview guide, with which I tried to guide the interviews. I generally started with open questions and then let the interviewees decide where to go. I structured the interview according to a sequence that first gave space to narratives before allowing me to ask more specific questions related to campaigns, women's rights, international aid, developmental or humanitarian politics, and grassroots activism. Because I was studying up, I interviewed people in a better socio-economic and professional position than myself. These experts are used to giving interviews because they work in public or semi-public professions; it often seemed that people preferred standardized questions to open ones (Bogner and Menz 2002).

On Producing Data

There is manifold literature on how to generate, work with, and analyze ethnographic data (Emerson et al. 2011; Beer 2003; Stoller 1989, 1994, 2016). However, few works are about how to conceptualize, define, or "grasp" data. Often, I was confronted with the challenge of not being convinced that my data was "real" or, in fact, data at all. I was further disturbed by the thought of differentiating between descriptive data and rich or thick data, which may not fit the traditional profile of gathered data—expert interviews, official documents, statistics and reports, and the like. While I started to evaluate my data, I realized the importance of the emails I exchanged with friends at home; that is, the kinds of data they contained and how they shed light on debates about the materiality of data and its analysis. The use of the emails combines the researcher's positionality and the importance of a researcher being the instrument of data production in ethnography.

Below is an excerpt from an email I exchanged with a friend:

Email to BJ, May 3rd, 2016

// I am doing fine, thanks and fieldwork is going well. It is just that sometimes I am wondering whether I generate enough data. It is also a black box, a generic but abstract term, from my point of view. (...) I have been sitting in an NGO's office since my arrival here in Beirut. I am working part-time, so I am mostly in the office in the afternoons. At the moment, I am not doing that much, and I am waiting, to be honest. Well, no, that is not correct. I have to revise what I just wrote. I thought I would do "only" a bit of coffee and copies while watching the people. Nevertheless, instead, I had the luxury to participate in an external evaluation of one of the projects implemented by the NGO. This evaluation is an audit assessment included in the "doing good practices" of one of the international donors, which contractually requires the NGO to perform it. The evaluation involves staff evaluation of the project, too. Since the project is a regional one and the partner organizations involved in the project are working in several countries in the MENA region, we have to conduct interviews via Skype or phone, if we want to be correct, and do a qualitative analysis of the evaluation as required. The woman is in charge of the evaluation and has a PhD. She is teaching at a Lebanese university in the field of Public Health. She is well-known among (international) NGOs for her work as an external evaluator and academic for her research focus. I was obliged to read the first draft of the report before the submission to the donor. It happened that we did a second round of interviews and analysis, where I acted as her assistant.

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Anonymization

Sociologist Christine Preiser (2016) speaks of shades of context and living environment in ethnographic research, which is negotiated according to acuity and interest. She argues that ethnography wants to create visibility and can make the invisible and hidden visible. However, this can conflict with the interests of members of the field who do not seek such visibility.

Preiser therefore advocates a balancing act between negotiating (in-)visibility and respecting ethical codes of behavior while reducing potential harm.

I took a classical approach to anonymization: I changed the names of some people and organizations and invented, compared them with or merged others. It was challenging to anonymize campaigns (especially ongoing ones) because they are part of public life and politics. Moreover, the campaigns' visibility grows through repeated mention, increasing their visibility and popularity to the public and an international audience what women's NGOs and women's rights activists want to reach. Within the scene, there is a great deal of turnover. Many are no longer in the places they were in during my fieldwork in 2016-2017. Likewise, it was sometimes not easy to anonymize individuals because they are public figures. I will ask permission from these people prior to publication, however.

In this chapter, I introduced the methodology of my research and fieldwork and described my methodological tools, theories, and concepts used in fieldwork and data collection. Central to this was my role and themes around representation, values, and norm systems. The chapter also showed that ethnographic research plays a vital role in the field of legal transformation by non-state actors.

Considering the highlights and challenges of the field research, the next chapter will focus on the practical work of campaigns that demonstrate the transition from social demands to legal change. This demonstrates how NGOs and women's rights activists incorporate their political concerns into legislation, paving the way for legal reforms.

3. Campaigning for (Legal) Change in Lebanon

3.1 Introduction

After focusing on the methodological considerations, we will now take a detailed look at how women's rights organizations formulate political demands through campaigns and work towards legislative changes.

For Tala, a women's rights activist and an employee of women's NGO ABAAD, working at the grassroots means to "dust the ground". By that, she means reaching people during their daily life practices and routines and drawing attention to campaign goals, including the transformation of law and the change in long-term perspective expected to accompany it. Such awareness could impact and hopefully change normative behavior in everyday life. At the same time, Tala is aware that "changing policies on its own will not change realities, but it leads to a direction". Legal shifts and transformations can occur in changes to single, specific legal articles or changes to Lebanese constitutional law in general. This chapter discusses concrete examples of value changes and translations, in terms of addressing women's issues by reforming discriminatory and gendered laws and also in the unequal jurisdiction between men and women when it comes to intimate relationships and family matters. Concretely, therefore, it is on one hand about legal inequality between men and women; on the other, it is about inequality between women with and without citizenship when it comes to family, criminal, and civil law. However, in this chapter I mainly focus on campaigns that address women's needs in relation to personal status and family laws. I mainly focus on the early marriage campaign and the citizenship and nationality law campaign. Other campaigns are also mentioned, but I already focused on these two campaigns during the chapter on field research. My focus and perspective on campaigning gave me access to informants and institutions as well as insight into what NGO work and cooperation entails. I gained knowledge and insight into the relationship between the actors and each other and the role of those actors relevant to decision-making. What underlies these two campaigns (and this is one of the main arguments of this thesis) is that both are about freedoms and equality with men, which has to be established by law in order to be legally valid. Although one campaign focuses on personal laws and the other on civil ones, both want to reform existing law by giving women legal rights equal to those enjoyed by men. Moreover, this should apply to *all* women, i.e., women there should be no distinction made between any of the women living in Lebanon;

all should have equal rights. I argue that for women's rights activists and the campaigns they launch, law is considered a form of projection. Furthermore, law is not only a means to an end but a vehicle for making visible the context of women's lives, which is one of inequality due to the family and citizenship (or "nationality") laws.

In this chapter, I turn to that area of the translational chain where women's rights and women's claims are translated into political claims. I examine rights-advocacy campaigns launched by local women's NGOs. Through such campaign work, NGOs make political claims and interact with political institutions in the public and political spheres. I discuss how organizations both problematize and make visible the kinds of gender inequality that become social inequality. Institutional campaign work is intended to effect a change in values, one related to law or legal change and normative order. Campaign work constitutes, therefore, politicizing, problematizing, and claim-making work. It can also be called advocacy work in an institutional setting (Lindekilde 2013). Women's rights campaigns utilize women's rights advocacy to problematize the legal system's discrimination against women and the unequal implementation of law. I suggest that research on vernacularized political and legal activism contributes to current issues that address violence and gender inequality in the private sphere. The violence that occurs most in personal life thus becomes an issue in the public sphere.

Throughout this thesis, I address how women's rights organizations work on (legal) rights transformation. Each chapter functions as a building block to answer the research question. This present chapter contributes that working on legal transformation requires visibility in public and in the political landscape. Working on legal transformation requires working towards changes in law and contributing to lawmaking and decision-making procedures by turning women's rights claims into political ones.

This chapter has two parts: In the first, I address how women's rights activists and women's NGOs make political claims. This is done through institutionalized activism, which includes NGOs and women's rights groups at the grassroots. Institutionalized activism means that organizations are professionalized and designed to be seen and heard. The organizations are rendered in committees and interconnected divisions but institutionalized in the form of NGOs. Such institutionalized activism is based on campaigns and their work, which I have already mentioned. Rights-based advocacy practices used in campaigning include activities

such as lobbying, mobilization and networking at local, transnational and political levels. Institutional work is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 below.

In the second part of this chapter, I look at the historical background, the legal traditions and the historical continuities that the current Lebanese constitution conveys and implements. New legal institutions and processes represent impediments to gender justice and women's rights claims on political and legal levels. Women's rights organizations are trying to overcome these obstacles through their campaigns. This section of the chapter is about the point, where campaign work is transformed into law. Campaigns against gender-based violence serve to demand legal justice through legislative reforms, amendments and changes. They also intend to shift responsibility to state institutions and hold them accountable.

3.2 Claim-Making and Political Interference

This perspective is particularly important in connection with the role of organizations that campaign for women's rights. Campaigns target and problematize social problems; they render them visible. This politicization is particularly evident in the structures and strategies that organizations such as the NCLW use to formulate political claims in the context of lobbying and mobilization. To understand how this influence is achieved, it is important to consider the nature of institutionalized activism as well as the formation of organizations. I discuss in this section how women's rights claims by campaigns and women's NGOs develop the ability to influence the lawmaking process—that is, with the creation, implementation, and interpretation of law. Women's rights are politicized claims about the need to make the state accountable to citizens for its duty to create, amend, and abide by law. Women's rights claims are aimed at keeping track of and enforcing laws, along with demanding new rights and strengthening existing ones.

Institutionalized Activism and the Formation of Organizations

Hadi once told me, as we sat in the office of the law firm he worked for, that "everyone likes civil law, but to achieve real success, you have to shoot for big [reforms] while working

step by step to achieve them." This view is reflected in the way the NCLW works, which plays a central role in the promotion of women's rights through its semi-governmental structure. A middle-aged Lebanese man, Hadi had recently resigned from his position as Secretary-General of the National Committee for Lebanese Women (NCLW). NCLW is a non-governmental organization with close ties to the government. Hence, from a structural point of view, the organization is considered semi-governmental. Its members actively lobby and advocate for women's rights and women's empowerment in the public and political spheres. Through their commitment, they can act as a bridge between civil society and the state. The majority of NCLW's members are women, themselves politically involved—academics, mothers, and wives of members of Parliament. NCLW is part of the civil society.¹⁶ Its position enables it to mediate between activism and the political and public spheres. Thanks to these collective efforts, the NCLW is able to bring women's issues into political discussions and thus influence the government agenda. That means that campaigns or initiatives led by local women's rights organizations are discussed with NCLW members, who then promote them. They then bring them to the fora and audiences they have access to, such as boards, associations, and committees. NCLW acts as a representative of Lebanese civil society, and the voices of the organization's members are represented and heard in international platforms such as networks of global women's rights groups and various UN commissions and networks. NCLW's privileged position within the sphere of political and public life in Lebanon allows the organization to bring issues related to women forward on the state's political agenda, thereby influencing political discourse when it comes to women's affairs. Their position, as simultaneously an intermediary between the state and civil society and an actor in civil society, gives them credibility and access to key players on a policy level. As Maya, an activist who I spoke with and who is discussed more in chapter 4 on women's NGO work and in chapter 5 on grassroots activism, once pointed out, "they [NCLW members] are respected and heard in public."

Usually, joint political committees approach local NGOs to lead a campaign after they have proposed a draft law in Parliament. Parliament has accepted their motion for debate and consultation. Afterwards, NGOs visit with representatives of Parliament, state ministries, and

¹⁶ Civil society acts as a counterpart to civil servants, meaning that they are neutral and independent from ruling structures and forces. This is rare in a Lebanese context, contested and challenging, since political, legal, and religious ties are so closely intertwined, performed, and defined by law and politics. However, I am utilizing the term only if the term is used from an emic perspective based on my empirical data.

the president (or, as is often the case with women's rights issues, his wife or daughter) in order to bring up their campaign's concerns. In such a delegation, members of NCLW are always present. NCLW as an institution is therefore hugely relevant in transmitting and representing interests. Campaigns need NCLW's support and partnership. Lama told me that PCA is a partner of NCLW. This section, along with the example of NCLW, has clarified the relevance of being an institutionalized organization, as well as what is meant by institutionalized activism and its importance to an organization wishing to make itself visible and heard in order to problematize issues politically.

Institutionalized Activism and Politics

Paula is an activist and NGO worker who is partly responsible for the campaign. She told me that discussion of Article 522 was once 12th on a list of issues to be discussed by Parliament. In the session, however, rather than discussing abolishment of Article 522, lawmakers simply jumped from item 11 to item 26 (the latter was about the salaries of public employees). This shows that Parliament can hinder the process of law reform approval however they like. Article 522 is part of the chapter 7 in the penal code, which NGOs and women's rights activists regard as controversial because it exempts a male perpetrator from prosecution and instead punishes the women involved. The legal framework established by chapter 7 treats men and women unequally and is therefore discriminatory against women. The campaign on Article 522 was launched in 2016 and was intended to last three years. According to the spokeswoman for the NGO leading the campaign, they did not expect that—after several failed attempts and approximately nine months of campaigning—their proposition would clear all hurdles and land on the agenda for discussion. Parliament evaluated the draft they had submitted and agreed to repeal Article 522. The debate omitted to mention the push to amend another article on the same legal paragraph. In December 2016, the responsible authority started to consider the proposed legal draft. The issue was taken up by Parliament in Spring 2017 and has remained in limbo since then. Elie Karouz from the political party Lebanese Forces submitted the draft. Just as Paula had predicted, in 2017 the majority of Parliament voted for total abolishment, though the result was uncertain until the very end as several political forces were in favor of amending the article slightly. They performed awareness-raising by distributing flyers in the streets and a conducting a general

poll within the country. The team leading the campaign presented the results of the poll in a press release. Two performances staged by the NGO leading the campaign gained the attention of transnational networks in Europe, the Arab region, and the United States.

Certain media outside Lebanon, along with several channels inside the country, brought up the topic during their coverage of the NGO's performances. In one of the performances, young women wearing bridal gowns performed outside Parliament. Their dresses were torn in places and spattered with red paint, symbolizing blood. The women performed inside cages, occupying part of them while the rest remained empty: this rendered a reference to the men who would avoid punishment or prosecution if the article was not revoked. Sonia, the campaign's leader, told me that with this action, they wanted to remind parliamentarians that campaigners were still waiting for their verdict. Sonia's intention with the action was not to push the parliamentarians, but rather to remind them of activists' demands. This performance was shared on social media worldwide. It showed up in several Western newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *die Zeit*, the *Daily Mail*, and *Huffington Post*.

Though the central purpose of the action was to draw parliamentarian's attention to the political decision that needed to be made, it also made an international and transnational audience aware of the existing law. The Lebanese public were sensitized to other legal articles as well. Therefore, it seems likely that parliamentarians felt some pressure from both the (international) media and the Lebanese public.¹⁷

As a result of the information spread about the campaign, Paris-based Lebanese artist Mireille Honein got in touch with the campaign committee to contribute her artwork to the campaign and its cause. Honein's art installation was exhibited for one month at the Corniche, a seaside promenade in the Beirut Central District. Families gather there, children playing, men fishing, and couples walking. It is a lively location where people spend their leisure time. The installation contained wedding dresses hanging on poles, covered in blood. This art installation mostly gained international media attention in particular networks. When Parliament released a statement confirming that it would do away with article 522,

¹⁷ I was informed about the repeal of the law at the time that Prime Minister Rafic Hariri tweeted about it.

transnational networks praised the campaign's success as not only a victory for women, but for women's rights and the feminist movement in general. Women's rights activists deemed the victory a global policy change win. Local women's organizations succeeded in translating their needs onto a political demand with the support of international law that indulged legal changes for women the women's activists dedicated. The legal changes requested more (legal) protection and criminalization, which the state is responsible for.

There are many ways of drafting a law in this political setting. The most efficient one is for individual parliamentarians or a committee to create a draft. Grassroots actors can bring up their concerns and integrate them into those of the political sphere if they turn them into political objects. They need to lobby either deputies, Members of Parliament, or a minister to submit the draft law within Parliament for consideration.

The process of legislation starts with presenting the draft in front of the cabinet of ministries. If it is adopted, the draft then moves on to the committee responsible for the affairs it is related to. Afterwards, it is sent to Parliament for discussion. Then it goes to the Legal Committee, which specializes accordingly in civil, administrative and criminal law. Finally, it is presented to all committees before finally being adopted by the general assembly.

3.3 Rights-based Advocacy and Campaign Work

In this section, I analyze the meaning of campaigns in the context of women's rights and transnational activism campaigns' significant efforts to advance women's rights through greater visibility and equality under the law. I also address how womanhood and women role models relate to statehood and citizenship and the rights and services associated with them. Finally, I explore how gender-based violence is turned into a political claim by employing a pioneering campaign.

Women's NGOs' institutional activism and political work in Lebanon primarily focus on crafting a new state structure and new state institutions. For this task, they utilize (legal) mobilization and the politics of rights strategies, demanding social justice and equality.

Campaigns are well-known fields of inquiry among researchers, especially in the field of political science and particularly in the study of political marketing strategies (Ansolabehere, et al. 1994; Ansolabehere and Warburn 1995; Brady et al. 2006; Briens and Wattenberg 1996; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2003; Iyengar and Simon 2000; Mauser 1983;

Scammell 1999). Anthropological disciplines, mainly medical anthropology, research and approach campaigns in the context of development and international aid services and health. Researchers mainly investigated the campaigns' impact on nurturing habits, sexual practices, rates of medical consultation, vaccination procedures, and economics of pharmaceutical purchasing within communities (Butt 2002; Nichter and Nichter 2002). Campaigns against female genital mutilation (that is, *anti-FGM* campaigns), AIDS prevention campaigns, and family planning and anti-abortion campaigns have been the focus of research (Ember and Ember 2003; Ingstad 1990). In the field of legal and political anthropology, campaign research explored global political concerns such as climate change and social justice (Niezen 2010). Domestic political concerns such as military recruitment campaigns (González 2007; Price 2002; Rohde 2007) were main research topics. Advocacy in the context of rights-based campaigns seems to represent a growing field along with the emergence of human rights and individual rights discourses worldwide.

Transnational Rights-Based Advocacy

Transnational advocacy combined with local activism has not only projected international law into local contexts, but also, in many instances, reallocated energy and resources to local issues (Silliman 1999). In that respect, institutionalized activism in the form of NGOs is a critical aspect of women's rights advocacy, particularly when the aims of that activism transform into political claims. Nevertheless, linking international legal culture (especially human rights treaties) with transnational activism networks takes interventionist law and politics in new directions, ones in which they can be reshaped, re-politicized, and re-judicialized (Santos 2005:53). Through its persistence, women's activism has increasingly acquired political influence that allows it to impact public discourse, as my empirical data will illustrate in this chapter. I argue that women's NGOs increasingly play the role of expert, no longer just advising but also making decisions. Women's NGOs have developed legal tactics for maneuvering to achieve their overarching strategy for legal reform. They do so despite the Lebanese state's restrictions on lobbying legislative, administrative, and judicial institutions on CEDAW.¹⁸

¹⁸According to the website of the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted into the UN Statutory in 1979, after the first framework for women's rights demands was drafted in 1946.

To overcome these obstacles, women's NGOs engage in campaign activism around legal issues and mobilization work. American sociologist Donald Black's (1973) concept of "legal mobilization" explores how law, social movements, and activism interact with each other in favor of social change. Thus, women's NGOs are not only intermediaries between donors and their specific target groups, but also mediators within society and the political-legal system, which makes their relevance to public and political life much more evident. Another important point here is that NGOs have a significant connection to their target groups, which are located at the grassroots. Hence, they reach the grassroots. American sociologist Cecilia MacDowell Santos speaks of transnational politics of rights in the sense that "transnational legal mobilization will be emancipatory and will constitute a subaltern cosmopolitan politics and legality" (MacDowell Santos 2007, 31).

Advocacy and awareness-raising are concepts of institutionalized women's rights activism, which can influence the status quo in the long run. A common practice, therefore, is providing awareness-raising sessions facilitated by organizations. Women's NGO RDFL, for example, holds almost 50 awareness-raising sessions during a year in different regions and within various communities in Lebanon. According to Maya, an activist, awareness-raising sessions can take the form of roundtables, panel discussions, screenings, training, and workshops, as well as various activities "about different issues related to women's rights, for example, (gender-based) violence, or nationality. This is to cover women as much as we can; we go to schools, universities, municipalities."

RDFL's activities demonstrate what Tala meant by "dust the ground" at the beginning of this chapter; in an attempt to educate a large swath of society, women's rights organizations reach out to the grassroots through imaginative campaigns, mobilization, and advocacy.

Campaigning for Legal Change That Benefits Women

The process of tackling legality women's NGOs support does not only serve as instant means for a protective measurement if a women's integrity is or will be violated. It goes

According to CEDAW (2019, URL), "the Convention takes an important place in bringing the female half of humanity into the focus of human rights concerns. It further adds that the spirit of the Convention is rooted in the goals of the United Nations: to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity, [v] and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women." The Lebanese state ratified the CEDAW convention in 1997, with the exception of articles 9, 16, and 29. See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>.

without saying that the aim is to create a legal framework that protects women in areas where—because of patriarchal structures—no legal protections had previously been afforded to them. However, if it had only this purpose, the law would serve as a paternalistic tool for maintaining power over women's lives (and their reproduction and sexuality in particular) as many of my informants pointed out. It would legitimize and perpetuate structural violence as an integral part of neglect. Instead, legal reforms should incorporate the principle of equality between men and women. I believe that law expresses discrimination against women even as it establishes legal gender equality. I argue that discussions around the essential role of gender-politico debates and law challenge the law's ability, in light of its very character, to deliver real opportunities for the eradication of gender inequality within society. This includes the impact of gender equality measures and the elimination of gender discrimination. The aim is, therefore, to have the best possible impact on society, creating social change that benefits women by advancing the cause of their empowerment and equality. Such a purpose immediately evokes the various complex conditions under which women live (Hunnicut 2009). Legal statutes that support precarious and harmful living conditions for women need to be repealed and replaced with ones that enhance women's living conditions. Legal norms need to grant women broad protections and freedom within their social lives (Büchler et al. 2012).

Campaigns and Women's Rights

Women's rights campaigns aim to advocate ideas and point out issues, usually ones related to global ideas or the reasons for international law, such as human rights. These campaigns, with their transnational affiliations, are based in transnational networks that share common discourses and values. By the very nature, transnational networks channel campaigns into domestic settings. Campaigns therefore travel, illustrating a dynamic flow of actors, ideas, and goods (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 1999). Campaigns can mark the beginning of social movements that develop from small groups into national or international movements.

Having clarified the role of campaigns in addressing social norms, the focus now turns to specific women's rights issues and legal disputes. Campaigns on women's issues usually bring up criticisms of norms, moral values, power relations, and legal discourses and customs, revealing their implications for social life, practices, and norms. Campaign's agendas visualize

issues and turn them into political demands. By launching a campaign, problems get addressed; campaigns are therefore the initial step in problematizing issues and making them apparent. As Hadi, the activist and lawyer, implied in the above quote on the desire for civil law, campaigns tend to have an overall vision, but it is the reality of planning for smaller achievements that realize it in the long run. Campaigns assemble and connect people seeking to achieve a common goal. Campaign's agendas have overall political and social visions with stated goals. Campaigning is usually a project with a fixed beginning and end. The action has a time limit, and the combination of actors and the scale they work at aims to attract as much attention from as broad an audience as is possible.

Launching and leading a campaign requires long-lasting, durable procedures and a commitment to accepting losses and defeats on the way towards the goal. It usually entails several attempts. Launching a women's rights campaign also entails forming a coalition, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. A collective is put together with local actors such as media, academics, NGOs, activists, lawyers, and sometimes individuals from related government bodies, such as ministries and Parliament, and politicians in general. Common ground needs to be found and agreed upon by first women's rights activists, then their respective campaign donors, and finally, their political allies, Parliament, and the public. Those demands, of course, need to be realized within the legal system, and as they become articles of law they are significantly compromised. Despite (or because of) these structural obstacles, women's NGOs perform the institutionalized activism of advocacy with a rights-based approach that aims to change the law for the benefit of women's visibility.

Turning Gendered Violence into a Political Matter

In addition to general campaign work, issues relating to gender-based violence play a central role, particularly in connection with legal protection measures. As many activists have pointed out, the prevention of violence became a topic for consideration in the aftermath of several international conflicts in the 1990s and preventive measures and actions did have a considerable impact on the promotion of women's rights. Addressing violence through criminalization began to matter in law, politics, and Lebanese public opinion when, in the late 1990s, a group of activists founded an NGO called The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Woman (LECORVAW). In this context, the founding of specific NGOs such as

LECORVAW played an important role in addressing and combating gender-based violence. As Nay, a former activist and now executive director of a women's NGO, told me, the activists' vision was primarily to defend rights. Eli, a LECORVAW employee, explained that LECORVAW began its work in Beirut before spreading across the country via its various centers and outposts. According to him, women's NGOs back then generally demanded more protection from the state when it came to preventing crimes, where the women and the jurisprudence discriminate involved women while providing men's relief. Such law relates to family matters, with a focus on offspring and inheritance as well as relationships between men and women, especially spouses. Eli adds that national law already provides for punishment for violations of criminal law in cases involving a use of force. Nevertheless, many activists, women's organizations, and, most notably, the NGOs LECORVAW and KAFA, felt that this law was not applicable enough to women and did not sufficiently address gender-based violence. Almost all of the activists I spoke to confirmed that the primary objective of their projects and political activism was to protect women against violence. Mina, PCA's executive director, revealed the importance of referencing the mainstream approach to violence. As an example, she mentioned KAFA's 2013 campaign against domestic violence, which resulted in the so-called "KAFA LAW", which criminalized violence against family members. KAFA issued a public that the penal code did not providing enough mechanisms for the protection of violence victims. These practical campaigns illustrate how civil society engagement can uncover specific gaps in the law and directly bring about legislative change, which underlines the central importance of such initiatives.

The KAFA Law as Pioneering Campaign Work

KAFA, as the leading NGO, started the campaign on domestic (or "family") violence as an attempt to protect women from marital violence, which was (and still is) legitimized in personal status laws. These laws (and many of the individual sectarian personal status laws) allow men to use violence against women as a form of punishment, especially when a woman does not obey an order. In their campaign work, KAFA brought up the testimonies of survivors and highlighted casualties in cases where the criminalization of violent actions could have prevented death. The goal of this action sparked a broad debate in the public and political sphere in Lebanon. Tala, an activist and NGO employee, likened the shallow discourse on

gender-based violence to "naming and shaming". This discourse clearly addressed concerns and problems and specifically identified perpetrators—that is, those who needed to be held accountable. The discourse promoted by campaign leaders was firmly directed at personal life and intimacy. It sought to emotionally invoke a desire for justice and reach people, especially men, who realized that it could also happen to their daughters.

After years of hard campaign and activist work, an amended version of the law finally passed through Parliament. KAFA gained wide public attention through this campaign. One of the main revisions was to change the statement of the law's purpose; In the end, the initial draft's "against violence against women" was rephrased to "against family violence." Feminist and women's rights activist voices claim that the revised legal article creates a back door for religious authorities to continue trivializing violence against women in marital relationships. The campaign leaders were not satisfied with the final draft of the legal article. However, despite the failure of the original demands (making domestic violence in marital relationships or between spouses—particularly when direct at women—a prosecutable offense) almost all women's rights actors and activists agree that the KAFA law marked a significant turn in the women's rights movement and feminist politics in Lebanon. The KAFA law campaign made women's rights advocacy and campaigning more visible and accessible to the public and therefore reached a wider audience. On an international scale, the KAFA law campaign received wide recognition from transnational women's rights activist networks. As KAFA's executive director told me, many women's NGOs campaigning for the reform of legal systems and family laws (particularly those in the MENA region) used the campaign's design as a model. As another example, the design of ABAAD's campaign for the abolishment of article 522, along with the materials it produced, has been used by other women's NGOs in MENA countries affected by similar statutes.

Most women's rights organizations claim that the KAFA law operates as a driving force, one that modified the entire discourse on women's rights and violence in Lebanon. A paradigm shift in women's empowerment work has been observed: after the law's implementation, it gained widespread attention from the mainstream public. A large part of the public now takes women's rights issues more seriously, although according to Tala, the majority primarily associate women's rights with violence against women. Awareness-raising workshops and sessions have increased, and many NGOs have shifted their project focus to advocacy work. What legal mobilization work achieved had an impact on the recognition of gendered violence

in society. Public opinion on women's rights has changed now that political work on women's rights is no longer downplayed, acknowledged Saskia, an INGO worker who has been partnering with women's NGOs to implement projects at the grassroots for decades. Meredith, an actor in the sphere of international donors, added that before the KAFA law had been implemented and gained the recognition of the public, gender-oriented projects focused on the empowerment of women entailed embroidery or handicraft and artwork in general. Such an approach was embedded in the discourse of mainstream development from the 1980s onwards. By that time, development projects followed innovative market-oriented models and projects were designed accordingly (Escobar 1995). Technical and financial assistance sought to liberalize economies. Development projects were given agendas that demanded they encourage states to democratize. In this regard, Ruja, an INGO employee, feels that Lebanese society has become more liberal and democratic since the war. She said what happened during the twenty years of war might be a lot to catch up on. The civil war from 1975-1990 disrupted the political and social will to create for a unified Lebanon with a collective identity that would precede a reform of the confessional system. Women's organizations worked on improvements, but the war put women's rights issues on hold and, in a more conservative atmosphere, even made the situation worse. Nay noted that the civil war strongly affected women, women's rights activism, and the women's movement. Ruja made the comparison with, Western, European standards and project outcomes referring to the temporal horizon and, therefore, the missed time Ruja ought to think that the society needs to keep up with. Similarly, Hadya, an academic and activist for many years, who I met at her workplace for an expert interview, argues that

you have taken more than two centuries to overcome many challenges [European countries have shifted throughout the last 200 years into democracies]. You want to make us do it in many years. Postwar society became more modern in adapting legal reforms from the old, retained structures from the past. The wartime postponed or even thwarted advances within the society. Developments have been neglected [by the international development and aid industry] and underestimated many times what had happened [legal reforms in the sense of modernizing older structures] in the past 20 years. You want us to speed up, to be on the same page as you are, we cannot do this, we have other priorities, which might not be the same as in your countries.

3.3 Projecting (Legal) Campaigns into Law

This section discusses how campaigns perform filling gaps in the law and creating a non-existent civil law for family affairs and personnel status. It shows how the vision must be broken down into small pieces to be successful.

Concretely, it shows how attempts are made to change the nationality law—which dictates how citizenship may be obtained—using a citizenship campaign. The same is done with early marriage, which aims to change family rights. Both campaigns touch upon larger social issues and areas of tension.

The chapter shows how campaign work, which is ultimately project work done by NGOs, is translated into law.

Turning Law into a Unified, Civil Law

Hadi mentioned the aim of creating a unified civil law, which does not exist in the new Lebanese legal apparatus. In his words, it is "a desire of everyone". Hadi addressed two essential details when he raised the issue of the civil law and obstacles to achieving it. He used the adjectives "big" and "small", which brought up something meaningful about the content and aspirations of campaigns: the limits to what they can realistically aspire to and achieve given the structural circumstances. What I believe Hadi meant to say is that with every changed article of law that women's rights campaigns successfully evoke, the vision of a unified law and the formation of another state formation come closer to being achieved. Women's NGOs are working on a societal vision with every campaign coming one step closer to a unified civil law regulating family affairs linking it to the vision of strengthening women's rights through the visibility of women in law and the public eye, The secularization of family law takes place through the creation of civil law. This is against the backdrop of a lack of uniform or even generally accepted family laws. Sectarian institutions and religious authorities decide on what family law is applicable.

Many Lebanese activists and scholars discuss localized secularity as the "Lebanonization" of the politics of women's rights. Activist and academic Hadya contributed the following to this view:

We [an activist group] made a concession lately. We do not want to talk about secularization; we want to make a unified law, a unified family code, which can be

inspired by religious, ethical values. It could be a step forward. If we talk about secularization, they [politicians, authorities] say, "you want to be as Europe. Europe is atheist, and we have another culture [where religion is more part of the culture], we do not believe in that." Nevertheless, if we say, "we are living in the same country, how can we be citizens [of the same country] if having different family codes? [Then] We should have a unified family code." This was also a recommendation of the international commission of CEDAW. They [UN agencies' delegates] asked us to have a unified family code under which all Lebanese should be treated equally, on an equal basis.

Changing the normative role of a woman being considered in private and move and bring her into the public—by changing her social status and making her visible in public sphere. That is why women seek to make themselves visible through political participation, economic involvement, and laws. These issues are relevant to women because they tackle and are associated with the exercise of control, a gendered understanding of women's roles and attributes, images of women, womanhood, and women as social (and legal) subjects. Regarding the discourse on human rights and their Western interpretations, which Hadya believes are being tried to be enforced in Lebanon and other countries in the MENA region but are not wanted, she added the following:

We [the mainstream Lebanese public] is very reserved on the liberalization of sexuality. This is still a taboo in our societies, and we remain conservative on this issue. Based on sectarian alliances, families have an important position in our set of values, it has particular value because of sectarianism, and families are the first steps of the sectarianism. Human rights are a universal and an undeniable and integral part of humanity, people see that like that, but speed, some issues—especially sexuality and family—and priorities are different or addressed differently. We do not want to duplicate the West; I am telling you that from a very Westernized view. My country and many Arab countries are not Westernized as I am. Human rights as a universal good are making their way in our country and all the Arab world.

Globally, the images most often associated with women are a person in a care role or a family member. Women's positionality always appears submissive and connected to either a spousal or a social role. A woman always seems to be a subject that is attached to a superior subject. Such a perception invokes the image of a woman who is permanently dependent and linked to another dominant person or group. This authoritative person or group needs to take care of and guard her. The same images portray a vulnerable and passive woman, one who is not capable of fighting for and claiming her rights. As a result, women are recognized as

victims. As a result, women are recognized as victims. This is also the case in discourses when international actors create purposes in order to get involved and induce social development. These images spring from patriarchal, oppressive social systems, and the aim of women's organizations is to change this by building a women's agency that defies and remodels current images.

Lebanese anthropologist Suad Joseph (2010: 6) details the outlines of gendered citizenship in the Arab world, according to religion, kin, and family, as follows:

Most constitutions of Arab states identify the basic unit of society as the family. This suggests that the masculinization of citizenship in Arab states is tied to a culturally specific notion of citizens as subjects. The Arab citizen subject is seen as a patriarch, the head of a patriarchal family, legally constituted as the basic unit of the political community who accrues rights and responsibilities concomitant with that legal status.

The established legal and political system did not recognize women in the same way as men, or as equal citizens. Throughout history, women issues were often not taken into account or depicted in a way that advocated equality towards men. The rise of socially conservative decision-making structures, laws, and regulations neglected women and treated them as second-class citizens (Salameh 2013). A central goal of many of these campaigns is the creation of a uniform, secular family law. The following section takes a closer look at individual campaigns such as the one on equal rights in family and citizenship law.

Women's rights activists envision creating a new social reality. They stress the relationship between the state and individual citizens. Because of their sectarian affiliations, citizens are not entirely the subjects of civil law; instead, they are recognized as community members; claim-making tackles this fact. A unified civil law dwells in the view of binding every citizen together and holding each accountable, no matter their religious background. It pictures a society that is diverse but cohesive under the law, one that is composed of people who are different but treated equally.

According to PCA's campaign leader, Lama, the current citizenship and nationality law is an extension of the legal and political patriarchy, which considers only men citizens. The women's rights campaign on citizenship demands a change to that. The Lebanese Nationality law, which regulates the transmission of Lebanese citizenship and nationality, came into effect in January 1925 under French colonial power. The law only recognizes the patrilineal transmission of nationality as legal.

Most women's rights activists want women to be recognized as full and equal citizens, their societal roles equal to those of men. According to them, religious institutions should not be responsible for personal concerns such as marriage and spousal or familial relationships. Instead, they consider private concerns, including family and citizenship matters, the responsibility of the state and its institutions. Maya framed it like this: "We have a parliament to monitor every single bit in our life. Either we are a civil society or a different sect society."

In Lama's words: "Politicians agree with campaigners in private. Religious chiefs do not govern; they hinder the process of equalizing the naturalization."

One primary justification for not allowing women to pass on their nationality is that increased migration to and from Lebanon would jeopardize the agreement on proportional representation. Therefore, it would create any confessional imbalance within the multi-confessional system. In addition, debates on nationality rights have an immediate bearing on the "Syrian refugee crisis" and the state of long-term limbo that Palestinian residents of Lebanon find themselves in.

Lama rejects this view, considers it invalid on the grounds that it is sexist, racist, and wrong. Concerning the sexist inequality between men and women in citizenship law, she asks, "If this is the case, then how do Lebanese men pass their nationality to their non-Lebanese wives? While keeping in mind that men in some cases are allowed to marry four spouses. This is moral violence against women. It does not even matter whether the father is living in the diaspora outside Lebanon."

Campaigning Work

Campaign work and the performance of campaigning form a necessary part of the visibility of NGOs and NGO work in many ways. Campaigning and the work it entails play a major role in everyday institutional life. As will become clear throughout this dissertation and in the following sections in particular, campaigning and the action behind building up to and leading a campaign are not only staged in the street, to project the campaign's vision on the streets and public discourse. Rather it stitches together public, political, and NGO spheres, touching upon each and attempting to visualize the ways they relate. Activism doesn't only appear in the streets; it can take place anywhere (especially in offices) and in multiple ways.

A typical day for Lama illustrates the range of work done (and combined by) a campaign leader. An NGO's daily routine demonstrates what the organization is comprised of, including campaign work and, beyond that, project work as well.

Entering the office, Lama heads to her office right away. After making some long phone calls, she goes to the kitchen, where she makes coffee for everyone in the office. She left the office late last night, taking some work home with her to do before coming in this morning. She already had an appointment with a campaign activist at the Ministry of Migration. The case dealt with the legal issue of a Lebanese woman with a non-Lebanese spouse. The question was whether this woman should deny knowing the identity of the baby's father in order to ask for a specific amount of "social welfare state's support", as Lama called it. In cases like this, women can obtain support for their children by changing the father's registered identity to "unknown". The children do not have any connection to their fathers, who are not Lebanese citizens. The children are officially fatherless, half-orphaned, and they are entirely excluded from their patrilineal line. Any commitment and responsibility related to the father-child relationship becomes extinct and untraceable. The children are, in effect, illegitimate—"bastards". Lama points out that under such conditions, there are limited opportunities to change a child's legally status and documentation. A mother needs to either reveal the father's identity or register the child on the father's Lebanese identity card, which is not possible if her husband has non-Lebanese citizenship.

In addition to the legal marginalization of children in such cases, the child and the mother are also socially stigmatized, branded for morally and socially unacceptable behavior and suffering the consequences. If the father is registered and accepted as the real father, children receive state support. The father is also legally obliged to provide child support.

Lama emphasizes that a woman should have the right to either confirm or deny the identity of her baby's father without it having any impact on the baby's future or access to social support, with regard to residence, education, health insurance and economic status.

It does have an impact, however, and that is why the woman called the hotline promoted on the website for the citizenship and nationality campaign Lama is leading. Lama adds that it would be better for women to be widows, as that would restore their fundamental human rights. Her opinion is a response to the fact that single women do not receive money from the state; if they are officially widows, however, there is a chance that they may. If the Lebanese state does not grant this financial support, then it is more likely that the widow's

community will support her. However, in Lama's view, a woman with a dead husband is better situated within society than one with a living, non-Lebanese spouse. Lama also says that sometimes women divorce in order to receive social security benefits, especially for their children.

Both campaigns seek a unification of family rights, which should be universally applicable in all civil (in the sense that the state is responsible for it), family, and personal status laws. Campaigns try to achieve this in different ways and with different visions. They seek equality amongst women and also in relation to men, and therefore an equal legal position—that is, to be equal subjects and citizens of the Lebanese state. The equality desired—women enjoying rights equal to those of men—requires increased visibility in the law as well as gender-specific protection.

Marriage, I argue, represents an important central entity within society. It is barely possible to live as unmarried partners and difficult to get a civil marriage. Marriage is a relevant institution and form of social organization for families; especially women. Women receive economic and legal security through marriage; the legal protections and rights they receive within marriage, however, are unequal to those of men, making the institution inherently discriminatory.

Marriage in Lebanon, I suggest, is anchored in cultural traditions and grounded in religious beliefs; it follows norms and ideas. Hence, I consider that marriage is an integral part of social life. The moment of marriage represents the crossroads of a person's life; after they step over the boundary between married and unmarried, their life will be changed. The event of marriage symbolizes a performed act of liminal phase after Van Gennep's concept of rites of passage (1960 [1909]). The liminal phase transforms the state of wedded people within society, with regard to the way they are recognized. They are assigned a new role with new duties, obligations, and rights. Marriage is not only a decisive moment in one's personal life, where one is leaving one's core family to create a new one; creating a new family also involves living together as one entity under one roof. Beyond a personal level, marriage also represents a contribution to society, the bringing together and augmentation of two families with an eye towards reproduction. Since only religious marriage is possible, marriage bonds people to religious norms, ethics, and rules. Institutionalized religion dictates social behavior and acceptance. Marriage can be empowering and liberating, as it allows a person a new position and status within society.

Women's affairs appear to be incredibly intimate, private, and separated from public debates and interests. Domestic and local politics respond to them the same way, dealing with these issues in isolation. Compared to other human rights violations, I state that there is a clear prioritization. Women's rights thus receive a sensitive value, turn out to be highly sensitive political matters and are seen as almost untouchable (even sacred), and unchangeable backed from governing male politicians and religious leaders. As a result, resisting the current governmental system and promoting reforms and social change—both externally and externally—is a difficult process. Bearing this in mind, I was surprised to see a campaign poster dealing with child marriage in public, as I mentioned above.

This chapter first demonstrates how organizations in Lebanon highlight gender inequality through campaigning within institutional settings and routines. After explaining the theoretical and strategic foundations of campaigning, it illustrates in practice how NGOs uncover and emphasize specific legal gaps and social grievances. This is achieved through advocacy work grounded in a rights-based approach, which often involves lobbying, networking, and mobilization.

The chapter also analyzes how NGO campaigns on women's rights influence legal and decision-making processes, shaping public discourse, debates, and policies within political institutions. It underscores that campaigning involves politicizing issues, problematizing social norms, and making claims for change. This reveals how NGOs employ various strategies to increase political influence and foster social transformation.

These insights—how NGOs drive societal and legal change through strategic mobilization and advocacy—highlight the importance of examining the relationship between activist engagement and institutionalized work. While the previous chapter demonstrated the successes and limitations of legislative reforms in Lebanon, the central question now becomes: How can individual, creative activism connect with structured, formal practices?

This ongoing debate about balancing activism and institutional work underscores the challenge of bridging these two poles. Some activists advocate against formal organizations and emphasize radical approaches, while Sonia sees the integration of activism and NGO work as an opportunity to create new, innovative spaces for change. She illustrates that institutionalized activism is not only a means to achieve specific goals but also an ethical practice embedded in the day-to-day work of organizations.

Against this backdrop, the key questions arise: To what extent are space, work, and activism intertwined? And how do individual activists contribute to shaping new fields of political and social change through their engagement? Exploring the theory and practice of space production in activism can shed light on these issues—highlighting the emotional and ethical dimensions of activism as well.

Women's NGOs' Institutionalized Work Visions in Lebanon

It focuses on how these organizations translate transnational networks into local contexts, developing their own vernacularized forms of activism to drive social, legal and political change. The chapter explores how NGOs mediate between legal, social and political dimensions, creating a unique discourse that is both global and local.

Alongside examining their political and legal agendas, the chapter investigates how professional and ethical values become embedded in NGO work, shaping practice. Furthermore, it considers how such internal anchoring influences the self-perception of NGO employees, as well as how they are perceived externally, highlighting the dynamic tension between identification with international law and local challenges.

Overall, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the institutional and visionary work of women's NGOs in Lebanon, illustrating how they translate transnational ideas into practical, localized activism that influences various spheres and both practice and perception.

4.1 Introduction

"I have the activism spirit – my place is on the streets. However, I am a woman, and I have responsibilities, economic responsibilities. And I have children. I am obliged to work. It does not ban you from activism, you can create everywhere a space for activism," says Sonia, a self-proclaimed feminist activist and an employee of women's NGO Le Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises (RDFL). Sonia leads one of the most prominent women's rights campaigns in Lebanon. The campaign's goal is to establish a minimum legal age for marriage for women. In addition to Sonia's campaign, another campaign by a well-known women's NGO addresses the same issue. The campaigns address religious family laws, which establish the minimum age at which men and women can get married. They seek to establish a minimum age at which women may legally marry, and to have that age apply to all women, regardless of the sect they belong to. They also wish to establish universally applicable protections against exploitation, violence, and discrimination. A married woman is recognized as having higher social status. However, she changes family affiliation and her status changes from "daughter to wife." As we already know, within heterosexual marriage, men and women have unequal rights and obligations. This campaign seeks to lessen women's exposure to that inequality.

The debate over uniting activism and institutionalized NGO work is common and hotly contested among NGO employees and activists. Based on my ethnographic observations, many activists and NGO workers are clearly torn about which side of this debate they come down on but aware that they must make a choice, which involves a trade-off. Tala, an activist, sums up the compromising and conflicting situation activists face with the following:

How can I, as an activist, accept the process of bureaucratization and the hierarchical structure coming with the growth of the organization? It is kind of a paradox: if you are an activist, most of the time you are just an activist without any income. If you want to work in a sector, the NGO sector might be the better option than the private sector; for example, structure problems are even worse. [...] You are trying to break the system without knowing what the future system should look like. [...] It is challenging and a mind game, a constant mind game. What I learnt is that you have to pick your battles.

During my fieldwork, I met activists who refuse to work in organizations and who condemn taking money from specific funders or countries. This personal, political stance is seen as a radical one within the activist scene. At the same time, the example of Sonia suggests a reality in which activism and NGO work are combined, creating a space for institutionalized activism. Sonia does not seem to agree that refusing neither funding nor the workplace constitutes "bad" activism. To her, what differentiates some organizations from others is whether activists or NGO employees are working towards a cause rather than just implementing projects and activities. With "creating a space for activism", Sonia refers to the middle ground organizations such as NGOs inhabit between the poles of activism and very well-defined structures. On the other hand, she invokes the possibility of overcoming polarization by merging divergent positions through self-empowerment and allowing new, creative spaces to emerge. Institutionalizing activism means, therefore, to create cooperation that can stretch beyond institutional boundaries. It further implies wanting to make an effort and having the courage (and ability) to break with familiar patterns and understandings of the status quo in women's rights activism. Gender theorists Lia Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz consider activism to start with "educated hope", a "thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough" (Duggan and Muñoz 2009: 278-279).

This raises the question of the extent to which space, work, and activism are interdependent of one another and how the individual fields relate. I argue that compatibility presupposes a vision being projected onto a space, thus creating a new space. Such visions and spaces are practiced and realized in everyday institutional life. I will, therefore, explore

the practical meaning of what Sonia said about feeling the responsibility and the need to both do activism and explore the aforementioned space, which opens up because of the work and participation of people like Sonia.

This debate evolving around how to bridge activism and NGO work is also associated with the emergence of a desire (and need), felt by many activists, to dedicate themselves to a cause beyond mundane, regular employment. Indian anthropologist Naisargi N. Dave's book (2012) on activism in a queer, urban scene in India explores how space creates activism that is composed of emotions, affects, and ethics under the given circumstances of social, economic, and power relations. She thoroughly illustrates the relationship between transnational and translocal networks, which aim at rendering their vision real while also making visible the life contexts of queer people in India, along with the ways they are represented in spaces and movements. Dave further describes the importance of the space itself, as well as the work that creates it. The content of the work establishes values as normative ideas. The work considered "activism", which presents those engaged in it with a struggle to join, is a projection of an imaginative, ethical cause. It is not only implementing projects or goals; it is ethical work.

The institutional work of women's NGOs seems quite "normal", in the sense that it is ordinary, normative, everyday practice. As many informants told me during my fieldwork, the NGO's daily work routine, along with the narrative about it have undergone some changes through the increasing professionalization of NGOs and the fourth sector. Despite the growing internationalization of NGOs, their work seems to be low paid and require more hours due to increased administrative and bureaucratic requirements. It also involves an exhausting work environment and being subject to repeated frustrations, impediments, and unintended consequences, as I explored in detail with the example of campaign work and its durability in the previous chapter. Women's NGOs therefore do campaign and institutional maintenance work to project social change in the name of women's rights and address women's empowerment and visibility.

The institutionalized NGO work mentioned above represents an imaginative, ethical vision of women's rights activism in Lebanon, vernacularized to strengthen women's rights by claiming more visibility in law and a unified civil legal apparatus that stretches beyond sectarian categories and politics. Sonia sums up this ethical cause while simultaneously hinting at an inclusive, intersectional feminist perspective:

I am saying it now in the Lebanese way. Women [come together] from different sects, areas, maybe from the same sect but there is discrimination based on the class or region they are coming from. Women have a different background but a unified struggle they are aiming at.

In this chapter, I look at the actions of NGOs that have repurposed transnational activism into local networks operating in politics, economics, and the public realm, as well as looking at their vernacular (activist) contribution to these networks and actions in terms of as Sonia had described it.

The chapter deals with the fact that ethics have become professionalized; as Çubukçu (2018) stated, international law becomes an international lawyer's profession, and they identify themselves with it. Other than lawyers, I will focus on how international law has become the realm of NGO employees and professional women's rights activists. I will also look at the extent to which they identify themselves with international law and global, transnational activism and forms of solidarity.

It is therefore relevant to make visible NGOs as activist actors and NGO work as wage labor, as well as forming both a network and an NGO landscape in Beirut. I argue that NGOs attempt to bridge impediments related to regional, local, religious, class, generational, and gender identities through their everyday institutional work practice and vision. I further discuss the extent to which women's NGOs succeed in managing the balancing act of being mediators between different work levels and audiences, representation, and politics while continuing to perform its institutional functions, especially service provision. Besides that, the role and work of women's NGOs are the main focuses of this chapter. I therefore define NGO work as visionary and institutionalized work that is more than a regular job and which embodies ideas, ethics, and identification (as well as representation). I also consider the role of women's NGOs to be that of a mediator and representative which projects ideas and creates visibility. That means women's NGOs translate the way their aims at based on their values and normative ideas, given the societal and legal circumstances and the politics of international aid and competitive, self-promoting business strategies.

Throughout this thesis, I address how women's rights organizations work on legal rights transformation. Thus, each chapter of the thesis provides a part of the answer to the research question. This present chapter deals with how working on legal transformation

requires a vision that is practiced in institutionalized work. NGO work is a visionary, ethical vocation; its responsibilities entail more than those of a service job.

This chapter contains three parts. First, I identify, explore, and thereby map women's NGOs and their spaces in Lebanon. I argue that they create a specific new social class, as they operate and act as mediators and brokers who translate and convey knowledge between the international and local scales. What does their role or function mean in Lebanese society and international aid? I use a geographical map of their physical locations to show how women's NGOs open up a space characterized by institutional cooperation among diverse organizations that have also grown throughout their history.

Second, I look at women's NGOs' visionary and institutional work and how the visions and agendas of women's NGOs are already incorporated in their work and institutional life. This chapter also highlights women's NGOs' everyday work life, their tasks and duties, and what they understand and what they understand women's rights and gender equality to mean in practice. Third, I discuss institutionalized NGO work from the perspective of maintenance and administrative work. Bureaucracy and documents represent a projection of vision and visibility in everyday work life and daily work tasks and hint at networks and collaborations on the ground.

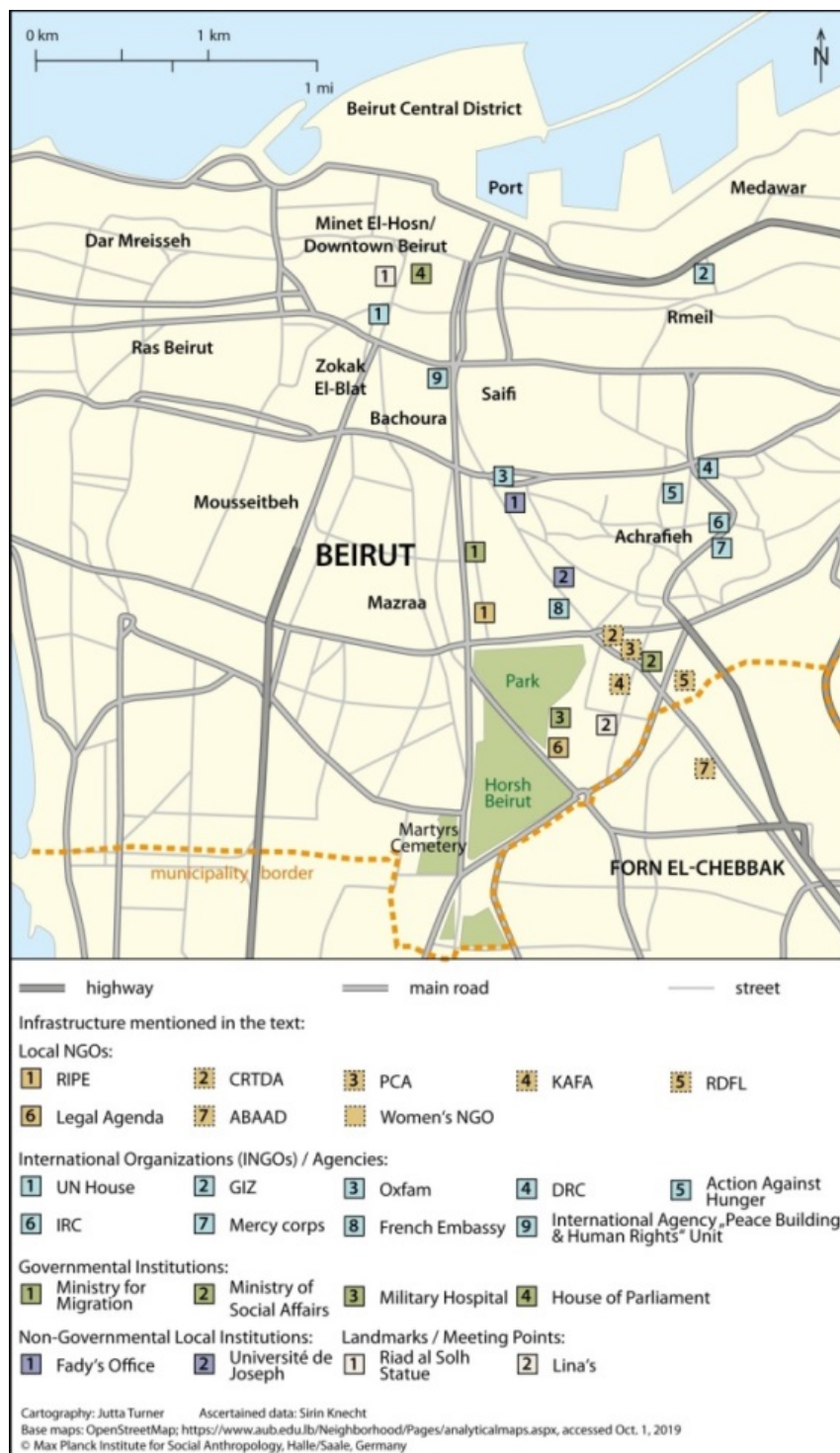
4.2 Women's NGOs: A New Class of Experts

These women and NGO employees play a decisive role in the local context through their activities and expertise, mediating and promoting social change processes. At the same time, they are connected internationally and influence transnational discourse on gender, human rights, and social justice. Through their dual position as both local actors and internationally recognized experts, these women are developing into a new social class characterized not only by their expertise, but also by their social position and influence.

In this section, I examine the role of women's NGOs in Lebanon concerning their identity, affiliations, and specialized expertise. I analyze their mediating function within political processes, the public sphere, and grassroots activism in Lebanese society. Additionally, I explore their identification with an international, transnational activist community, which they engage with through their accumulated knowledge and expertise. I also consider what their presence and role—often described as their *raison d'être*—means

within society, the local context, and the international aid industry. I argue that the evolving roles of these NGOs, alongside the circulation of knowledge and expertise, contribute to the emergence of a new social class. In this context, I examine how they define themselves as experts and facilitators, and how they relate to these roles.

Based on my empirical data, I have mapped the geographical distribution of women's NGOs in Beirut, which is illustrated in the following map:



Map 1 - NGO Field in Beirut (Knecht 2019).

My data indicates that most NGOs have offices located in the neighborhoods of Ashrafieh and Badaro in eastern Beirut. These areas also host many of their partner organizations and donors. The concentration of women's NGOs in these districts can be partly explained by their proximity to international organizations—mainly Western—and the foreign embassies and ministries of European states. Due to Lebanon's colonial history and the legacy of the French mandate, a notable French institutional presence persists. The majority of the Christian population resides in these neighborhoods, although Badaro itself has a Sunni Muslim majority. These districts are increasingly recognized as nightlife and entertainment centers—partly due to the more affordable rents in Badaro. Conversely, Ashrafieh hosts numerous international organizations and the residences of expatriates, which results in higher and rising living costs.

Most women's NGOs identify as focusing on women's issues, emphasizing rights, empowerment, and gender equality. They use the term *women's NGOs* because their activities aim to promote women's rights and strengthen women's empowerment. This terminology is used consistently throughout this work. Although many of these NGOs claim to be apolitical and non-sectarian, Lebanon's political and legal systems are highly sectarian, often necessitating cooperation with political parties or figures for recognition, influence, and funding. During a press conference on women's rights and women's issues, it was shared that only about 5 percent of women's NGOs in Lebanon are officially registered as secular organizations. Najid, a trained sociologist and independent NGO consultant, provided this information. He explained that outside this 5 percent, organizations tend to be affiliated with sectarian or political factions. The directors of such groups are often spouses of parliamentarians or political delegates. Based on my network and contacts, it appears I was only able to engage with this secular subset.

One interpretation is that NGOs flourish as a means to reinforce social cohesion and reconciliation in Lebanon. Beirut functions as an international hub for the wider region, with numerous humanitarian and development interventions shaping its social, political, and economic landscape. Globalization and transnational involvement tend to enhance NGO capacity for influencing public order and promoting social change. Issues of social justice, critiques of heteronormativity, and opposition to racist and colonial practices, as well as challenges to neocolonial power structures and gender constructions, are central concerns. Since the rise of NGOs in the 1990s, particularly following campaigns addressing violence and

family law, public awareness of their political influence has increased. Many interviewees and observers estimate that the number of NGOs operating, registering, and developing in Lebanon continues to grow steadily.¹⁹

The Mediator and Expert Role

Women's NGOs can be understood as multifaceted "femocrats" (Booth 1998; Gouws 1996; Sawyer 2007). As institutions, they tend to be stratified and hierarchical, often with a female executive director at the top. NGOs serve as agents—entities that hold agency and activeness—while also functioning as analytical categories, depending on the scale at which they operate and the roles they assume (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Koster 2014; Lewis and Mosse 2006). Femocrats within women's NGOs operate across multiple levels, from international to local, and often identify with their position as experts. They possess specific transnational knowledge, which is localized in practice, positioning them as a distinct class of experts. The networks—both emerging and established—in which women's NGOs are embedded play a crucial role in shaping and maintaining their expertise. This expertise and knowledge circulate within transnational networks, transforming between global and local spheres (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1999).

Within these networks, patterns emerge: women tend to be urban, Western-educated, and with decades of experience in NGO work or academia. This pattern appears to be reproduced throughout the institutionalized activism carried out by women's NGOs. Additionally, there are observable generational differences; younger activists often feel underrepresented or lack respect from more established, senior figures. Conversely, senior activists have expressed concerns regarding divergent views on intersectional feminism and

¹⁹ My assertion is underpinned by the data and information collection website Daleel Madani. Daleel Madani is a project of Lebanon Support, a Lebanese NGO. The website aims to make transparent and public the identities and backgrounds of civil society actors working in Lebanon. Job advertisements, events, and NGOs' profiles and contact data are listed, together with a link to their websites. To avoid work being duplicated, websites serve as reference points in the coordination of civil society and NGO projects. A mandatory precondition is that NGOs working in Lebanon register themselves and be recognized as such. Another characteristic of the organizations on the website is that they refer to their work (and their institutional profile) as being that of a civil society agent. A summary of the website from Lebanon Supports Itself (2019, URL): "Through Daleel Madani, member civil society actors can register and benefit from a variety of services, such as posting resources, projects, call for proposals, events, press releases, and job vacancies. Daleel Madani currently has a directory of more than 1,300 civil society actors, including collectives, national civil society organizations, international NGOs, UN agencies, donor organizations, and private sector firms working towards the public good." For further information, see <https://www.daleel-madani.org/about>.

activism, as well as issues related to their seniority and recognition.²⁰ As Egyptian gender theorist Islah Jad (2007) noted in her research on the women's movement in the Palestinian territories, there has been a shift in power dynamics: initially, women's issues served to translate authority to the grassroots; however, the emergence of a new local elite has shifted this dynamic, resulting in power being asserted over the grassroots.

Women's NGOs appear to be significant institutional actors, with structural and relational ties to a globally interconnected economy and international frameworks such as international law and human rights treaties. Their funding is influenced by domestic and international legal standards, which often require monitoring of budgets and sources of funding. In recent years, regulations have grown more detailed, with some Lebanese politicians proposing laws to regulate the proportion of foreign funding within NGO budgets. Economically, this dependency is reflected in sponsorship relations with international donors, requiring NGOs to adapt to donor requirements and regulations. These international connections also facilitate the transfer and appropriation of methods, tools, and knowledge, which can be used to implement specific projects, campaigns, or advocacy work. Thus, NGOs both engage in and respond to international norms, balancing project implementation with bureaucratic procedures.

Women's NGOs function as both active and passive mediators and translators. They do not merely transmit knowledge or adopt practices passively; rather, they actively participate in processes of translation and adaptation. Their engagement involves shaping the knowledge conveyed, influencing their target groups, and constructing narratives, discourses, and subjectivities. They may provide services such as advocacy, counseling, and access to resources, while also contributing to shaping social identities and discourses within their communities.

Many women's NGOs see themselves primarily as associations or collectives rather than purely business entities. They often perceive themselves as representing grassroots interests, contrasting with other actors working on similar issues but across different scales. Collectives and councils aim to unify and connect actors at the national level, creating networks that allow them to amplify their voices across political and transnational platforms. Having a principal office in the capital city provides opportunities for networking and

²⁰ The following chapter delves further into the nuances, interfaces, and points of conflict of women's rights activism on the grassroots. A possible classification of women's rights activism on the ground is better elaborated based on documentation.

institutional engagement. As illustrated by examples such as Sonia, Mina, and Tala, NGOs create institutional spaces for activism within the NGO sector. However, questions are sometimes raised about the extent to which these NGOs genuinely represent grassroots women and whether they are truly rooted in local communities—criticism that has also been voiced within activist circles, as I noted earlier.

The content and scope of women's NGOs' work are often seen as challenging, particularly regarding questions of representation. Their practices of projecting discourses and framing subjects and target groups influence how women are depicted and engaged. This raises important questions about whether these organizations genuinely give women a voice within specific discourses, and if such representation may sometimes adopt a victimized narrative that could perpetuate certain victimizations. Further inquiry is needed to determine to what extent women's NGOs authentically reflect women's needs at the grassroots level and whether their work remains inclusive and holistic. The issue of how legitimated and effective their actions are in reaching and representing their target populations will be addressed in the following section.

4.2 Visionary and Institutional NGO Work

This section explores what precisely constitutes the work of women's NGOs and examines the relationship between their institutional vision and their activities. Specifically, it analyzes what women's NGOs represent through their work. Most importantly, the work of NGOs serves as a reflection of the central themes under consideration. In this context, the concept of embodiment refers to the ways in which women's NGOs—both as organizations and as employers—project visions of women's rights, which are most prominently expressed through their activities. Embodiment can also take the form of roles, symbols, or representations, depending on the specific context and circumstances.

Furthermore, the section investigates how women's NGOs differentiate themselves and establish authority as expert representatives. A key focus is also on how their visibility and representation are constructed through their institutional activities. As discussed in the previous chapter, campaign work is fundamental for NGOs, as it enables them to gain public attention and visibility on both local and transnational levels.

A notable example is the KAFA Law campaign, in which the NGO KAFA, through sustained and extensive lobbying and advocacy, succeeded in influencing criminal law—securing stricter legal procedures and harsher penalties concerning domestic violence within families.

KAFA's success, along with the visibility generated in the public, political, and international aid sectors, increased awareness of both the legal changes and the organization's reputation. During my fieldwork, whenever I discussed women's rights with contacts working across various levels of the international aid industry, KAFA's name frequently emerged. This highlights an important aspect of NGO work: the significance of branding and self-promotion, which often appears as a form of institutional image-building. KAFA's institutional representation—particularly in relation to the billboards and campaigns I will refer to later—serves as a key example.

The section is organized into four parts: First, it examines women's NGOs as sites of work; second, it analyzes the role of NGO posters and visual campaigns; third, it considers the narratives and discourses—such as gendered myths—that are produced and reproduced through NGO activities; fourth, it discusses the strategies NGOs develop to manage and shape their work practices.

4.2.1 NGOs as an Institutional Workplace and Vision



Image 1 - PCA Workplace with Volunteer in Beirut (Knecht 2017)

// It was only during the Ramadan and Iftar²¹ gatherings arranged by PCA that I noticed which employees were Muslims and to what extent each practiced her religion. In those moments of daily office life, divisions due to religious belonging are made visible to the outsider. Apart from this distinction, last names also often generate initial assumptions about local origin and sectarian affiliation. However, in ordinary institutional work settings, team spirit and a sense of shared endeavor are essential. Embedded in hierarchy, an institutional organization requires the following of a work routine based on structure, procedures, formats, and specific material designs. The organization features in its agenda such technicality and the standardization of procedures. They thus contribute to the cooperation of the organization and operates as a thread through

²¹ Iftar celebrates the breaking of the fast after Ramadan.

the projects PCA supports and maintains. A shared ideology is a binding element, one which unifies PCA employees regardless of their position. Their ideas rest on altruistic (i.e., based in compassion or solidarity) notions of empowerment, social justice, stabilization, and the development of similar behavior between men and women in order to strengthen women's roles and rights. It is a vision of a society that is grounded in equality (between men and women and among its citizens) and beyond ethnic and religious difference, characterized by regional and sectarian belonging.²² //

The field note extract above describes as workplaces where organizational imagination is brought to life through daily practices. Their visions have materialized in routine institutional work. In Beirut, women-led NGOs tend to be concentrated in the city, due to administrative demands, bureaucratic requirements, and close ties with networks and donors. Interestingly, many of these NGOs are led or managed by women, although men also occupy roles such as accountants, board members, volunteers, or project managers.

These workplaces usually offer full-time and part-time positions with relatively flexible work hours, thereby addressing women's needs. However, they are often stressful, time-consuming, and unpredictable, characterized by hierarchical structures and limited opportunities for promotion. Self-sacrifice and absolute dedication seem to be implicit expectations. Recognizing NGO work while exploring it at the same time entails the discovery of contradictions. I argue that contradictions between theory and practice—between the conceptual frameworks and lived realities—become increasingly apparent in this context. These contradictions often take on a life of their own, generating unintended and unforeseen consequences. They frequently manifest during the implementation and execution of NGO projects. The envisioned goals of NGOs are shaped by theoretical considerations and practical, political negotiations regarding project design. In this process, power imbalances, financial dependencies, and donor regulations play a crucial role in decision-making. As a result, the outcomes of NGO activities often differ significantly from their original proposals. Beyond structural constraints, social practices are too complex to anticipate all contingencies holistically. It is widely understood that contradictions are inherent in any organizational

²² Extract from Field notes, 24.06.2016.

relationship. As women's NGO director Mireille noted, hostility and rivalry are common in the NGO sector. However, she added that similar dynamics are present in other sectors characterized by diverse, competitive actors. Additionally, working in an NGO can enhance one's reputation or at least provide a prestige boost. As Sonia pointed out: "People are working in organizations because they get paid, and it is sexy to say that they are working in an organization."

Anthropologist Tania Li Murray (2007) examined in her research the knowledge, instruments, and collaborations of experts, which aims at bringing forward reforms of existing conditions. From the results of a data analysis that she had conducted among various NGO interventions in India, she concluded that those interventions along with collaborations created new kinds of solidarity, political mobilization, and participation among NGO agents. Although she presents these networks in a mostly positive light, she also points out their potential to do harm and incite hostility and violence. In this regard, NGOs are not only multifaceted in their material forms; they also manifest a dual potential for either-or and even negative outcomes.

Applying Li Murray's framework to Lebanon, I argue that women's NGOs serve as agents of social change. They are primarily seen as apolitical social collectives representing their members, rather than formal political entities. Their work aims to transform existing legal and political structures, engaging in both project-oriented and political activism. I differentiate between administrative, bureaucratic, networking and campaigning activities within NGO work. I will describe these activities with regard to their visionary aspects in the following pages.

Documents serve as guidelines that NGO employees work to follow collectively.²³ Women's NGOs use these documents not only to organize their work agendas but also to represent themselves and showcase their projects and goals beyond their immediate institutional context. They function as binding elements and help understand social formations and the desired directions for social behavior, life, and development. Women's NGOs are generally strongly influenced—both institutionally and personally—by their visible agendas. Furthermore, these institutional policies shape the NGOs' visions, as seen in the example of PCA above. Employees come from diverse regions around Beirut, bringing different sectarian, ethnic, religious, gender, and class backgrounds. Historically, the

²³ The relevance of documents is discussed later in this section (see Mathur 2016).

development of women's rights activism and feminist politics in Lebanon often occurred along sectarian lines, which underscores the importance of this diversity.

Many of my interlocutors explained that affirmative discrimination in NGO recruitment during the early 1990s aimed to bridge sectarian divides between civil society and grassroots actors, such as local NGOs (Karam Karam 1990). Individuals from diverse regions and backgrounds were actively sought out—not only for their expertise but also to promote representation of diversity. However, within most NGOs, the pursuit of social change in internal, institutional settings is often considered more important than simply achieving demographic diversity. This perspective aligns with Akhil Gupta's (2012: 123) view that feelings of social unity and shared belonging are fundamental conditions in the formation of states and frequently underpin organizational dynamics.

4.2.2 Billboards and NGO Self-Representation (Work)

The next section focuses on posters, which are the most visible representations of NGO work. Sometimes, they serve purposes beyond self-promotion, leading to the dual outcome I previously mentioned: while posters primarily publicize institutional activism, they can also function as publicity for the organization itself.

Women's rights campaign posters are prominent in public spaces. They are large, fixed, often oversized, and placed at corners or locations where they cannot be overlooked. For example, during my taxi ride through Beirut's city center in chapter 2, I mentioned RDFL and KAFA's poster advocating for raising the legal age of marriage. One campaign poster particularly caught my attention: it depicted a young woman with sad eyes, wearing a wedding veil and holding a teddy bear. The symbolism was provocative; it highlighted the girl's youth and innocence, reinforcing the campaign's demand—written beneath her torso—that the minimum marriage age be increased to 18. Her expression conveyed a sense of injustice and vulnerability, making the message powerfully impactful. In the following, I describe a field vignette and include a photograph of this campaign to illustrate how such posters are perceived and encountered in the street and in public space.



Image 2 - : Early Marriage Campaign Billboard, spotted in Ashrafieh, Beirut (Knecht 2016).

// While I was waiting—almost halfway down the street, as parked cars blocked the sidewalk—my glance fell on a huge poster fixed on a street pole. The poster was a publicity campaign. Not an ordinary advertisement campaign, of the sort one would usually find in public spaces and along bigger streets. Instead, the poster pictured a young girl as a bride, with a white dress and a wedding veil. Her big brown eyes looked sad. At the height of her tiny body, a banner stated: "Raise the Age", both in English and, below it, Arabic. On the English version, the s in the word raise twisted itself into the number eight. Together with the i preceding it, it formed the number 18, the minimum legal marriage age that the campaign was demanding. The poster belonged to a famous local women's rights NGO that I was familiar with. However, I was still surprised to see such a campaign poster—

promoting women's rights and on a highly sensitive topic—in public in Lebanese society.²⁴ //

Further symbolic indicators of injustice and discrimination against young women can be seen in the health and integrity of the young woman in the poster, as I mentioned earlier. Billboards and posters can therefore be considered materialized forms of campaign or institutional activism, tackling social injustice with the aim of effecting change. Another billboard that caught my attention was promoting a campaign directed by the women's NGO ABAA, which sought to abolish Article 522 of the penal code. While driving on the motorway towards southern Lebanon, I suddenly noticed a poster depicting a young woman in a wedding veil, covered in bruises and blood, averting her gaze. The campaign promoted the abolishment of Article 522, which exempts a rapist from any prosecution if he marries the women he raped.

I once asked Sonia about the use of billboards and posters in women's rights campaigns. She replied that billboards have not been an essential part of women's campaigns for very long. Certain types of campaign posters have always been important, but posters specifically designed to be displayed in public are a relatively recent phenomenon. This trend began with KAFA's campaign on family violence, particularly violence against women and marital violence. According to Sonia, KAFA therefore initiated the use of these posters in campaigning. Subsequently, other women's NGOs leading campaigns also deemed it necessary to allocate budget to billboards, as donors value the idea of raising awareness of women's issues in public spaces.

Both donors and (local) NGOs increasingly focus on raising awareness by bringing private, intimate issues into the public eye to influence public opinion. However, Sonia is skeptical about spending money on billboards and campaigns. She believes that the funds would be better used directly to help affected individuals—through services or hotlines for those in need. Sonia also points out the importance of considering what campaigns actually communicate and what might be left out: "What appears to be appealing? What does a form of representation show, and what is omitted? We should always keep that in mind." Images of battered women often have a more impactful, scandalizing effect on the media, public discourse, and collective sentiment than less visually striking issues like economic injustice or neglect. Studies (Basu 2000; Bernal and Grewal 2014) support this, showing that campaigns

²⁴ Extract from Field notes, 24.06.2016.

against sexual violence tend to be more prominent and effective than those advocating for economic rights. Mina observes that NGOs, following international standards and UN agreements, tend to neglect economic empowerment and focus mainly on violence. Eli, a project manager at LECORVAW, noted this shift: "We focused on violence and forgot other issues. Recently, many organizations have started programs to empower women economically, but we consider that it's not enough." This illustrates how NGOs tend to adapt their projects to dominant approaches and international priorities. As a result, other critical issues, like women's economic independence, are often pushed into the background—even though project leaders and NGO directors also view these as important.

4.2.3 Gendered Narratives, Subjects, and Myths

While the structures of NGO work form the institutional framework, the narratives and discourses play a central role in the construction of images of women and target groups. These symbolic practices contribute significantly to the shaping of social reality.

Space is created through NGOs, their work, and the topics they address, which give rise to specific narratives and subjects, as shown in previous pages. Below, I describe the narratives used in NGO work, exploring their characteristics, origins, connections, and how NGOs communicate and utilize them. This section focuses on the narratives surrounding gendered subjects and the myths that NGOs help shape. These are primarily constructed within the context of narratives, discourses, and subjects—both legal and otherwise. A significant challenge faced by women's NGOs is visualizing the diversity of women, a group that constitutes half the world's population but is often reduced to a single phrase in project agendas: "target group: women". These constructed representations of narratives become a reality that characterizes NGO work and its promotion. Women's NGOs try to encompass an abstract entity representing the majority of women, aiming to have their rights recognized within legal frameworks. This entity, as a legal subject, is intended to embody women and their rights.

A Liberal Rights Discourse

In light of our understanding of how narratives construct, and shape gendered subjects within NGO work, it is essential to examine the influence of broader discourses, particularly those rooted in liberal ideas of rights and equality, on these narratives. The manner in which NGOs engage with and promote these concepts frequently reflects and perpetuates specific gender-related presumptions. Now, let me illustrate how the discourse surrounding liberalism and rights is gendered, and the influence this has on the work of NGOs and the advocacy of women's rights in promoting gender equality. According to Mina, the executive director of PCA, rights are fundamental to achieving equality between men and women. She believes this is largely tied to financial obligations, but I would also emphasize the importance of protection and security. In this context, the state has a duty to uphold these rights, forming the basis of liberal rights discourse.

Building on this, Mina suggests that rights and equality are not just "a private myth" that merely provide individuals with access to knowledge or a sense of autonomy. Instead, she refers to the broader legal frameworks—particularly family law and personal status laws—whose authority often rests with religious sects. This highlights how the private sphere, far from being apolitical, is deeply intertwined with political and legal power. Moreover, Mina points out that women's rights must challenge the traditional private-public dichotomy—the idea that private matters, such as family and personal issues, are excluded from public debate. Overcoming this dichotomy and disputing the "private myth" could significantly enhance the visibility of women's rights and help bridge the gap between private identity and public equality.

Expanding this analysis, Austrian anthropologist Sabine Strasser (2014) describes how the idea of autonomy within liberal systems is often contested, sometimes leading to systems that are paradoxically more repressive than liberal. However, I argue that the dominant narrative about the state often follows a liberal, democratic model—characterized by the rule of law and the presence of neutral judges overseeing authority and governance. Such a framework may serve as a form of resilience, addressing feelings of both hope and frustration in society.

This tension between liberal ideals and social realities is also reflected in local experiences. Hadya, an activist and academic, observes that "in Lebanon, you can be veiled and not veiled, even in Hezbollah areas. Some families do not require women to wear the veil

because the country is one where nobody is forced, and everyone is free." Her statement highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of liberal freedoms in practice. At the same time, she emphasizes that liberalism, while promising freedom, can also generate contradictions and risks—particularly concerning the notion of (repressive) autonomy and the actual realization of gender equality. She explains: "We do not have genuine gender sensitivity in the country, and this is partly due to liberalism, which creates an ambiguous situation; people are unaware of discrimination because of the freedom of movement, clothing, and everything else."

Through these reflections, it becomes clear that while liberal discourse forms the basis for many women's rights claims, its implementation and social effects are far from straightforward, often embodying ambiguities and contradictions that deeply influence societal perceptions of gender and individual freedom.

Representations

I will now explore the concept of representation and its significance within the context of NGO work and the processes of translating women's rights. The term "representation" is frequently used in human rights and rights discourse, especially where the suffering caused by violations of women's rights is conveyed through testimonies in the name of justice.

Testimonies are juridical concepts that play a central role in feminist and humanitarian discourses (Hesford and Kozol 2005: 8). They serve to make suffering visible, but their function extends beyond mere documentation: they are a means of highlighting global and cultural conflicts and of conveying normative expectations of justice.

When examining the subject of suffering more closely—including testimonies, eyewitness accounts, and autobiographical stories—it becomes clear how women's NGOs often operate within a discourse centered on the hegemony of suffering (Ticktin 2006; 2011). They largely use this strategy independently, relating it to specific topics and timelines. In doing so, they focus on women's subjects and issues, with their institutional work revolving around these focuses and goals.

An example is the approach many women's NGOs take in the fight against violence. These organizations often document fatal femicides, make this information publicly

accessible, and raise awareness through social media, posters, protests, or demonstrations. They also collect data, produce statistics, and report cases to increase awareness and help prevent future violence.

In addition to analyzing current realities, future perspectives are also of importance. Two central discourses can be identified: first, the "discourse of the intact child", which emphasizes the victimhood of young, vulnerable women. In this narrative, children and adolescents are portrayed as symbols of innocence and purity, who are at risk due to early marriage or violence. The purpose is to sensitize society to the need for protective mechanisms for "innocent" young women.

The second is the "discourse of motherhood", which predominantly envisions women as future mothers. Women's rights are articulated here through their connection to children and maternity, with a focus on the future. The goal is to position women as carriers of the next generation and to emphasize their rights in the interest of a future, secure life.

While these discourses are undoubtedly important, they also raise concerns. They tend to reduce women to their bodies or their reproductive roles, often neglecting their current needs, desires, and rights. Women become mostly portrayed as victims or future figures, which can hinder their active self-representation and agency.

From this perspective, it is crucial to develop discourses that acknowledge women in all their diversity as full subjects. NGOs should promote spaces where women can visibly assert their rights as capable, autonomous individuals—independent of stereotypical roles such as victims or mothers—and without relying on rhetoric that confine them within community restrictions or traditional expectations.

Furthermore, many NGOs employ medical and health discourses, using scientific evidence to underscore the vulnerability of young women, especially regarding early marriage. Medical professionals and scholars confirm that early pregnancies can cause irreversible physical damage.

However, it is also necessary to critically examine whether these medicalized narratives adequately capture the complex realities of women's lives. An overemphasis on health risks and medical explanations can lead to a narrow perspective that overlooks the societal and political root causes of violence and inequality.

These examples make clear how important it is to analyze carefully who shapes these narratives and discourses, and in what contexts they are produced. Many of these narratives,

often unintentionally, reproduce stereotypical images of women as victims or future mothers. They contribute to confining women to passive roles, which limits their capacity for active self-advocacy and hampers societal perceptions of women as capable, independent agents. In view of these layered narratives and strategies, the central question arises: What concrete effects do these practices have on the social positioning of women and on broader social relations? This question will be explored in greater depth in the next section.

Narratives

Narratives play a central role in shaping perceptions of women's rights and gender roles within activism and international aid discourses. Understanding how these stories are constructed and maintained is crucial for analyzing their impact on societal perceptions and power relations. I argue that women's rights activism and NGOs often employ the romanticized narrative of the young working woman, typically urban and educated. She is portrayed as a figure who not only sustains herself but also provides for her family, particularly for her children. These representational strategies serve as tools of advocacy, promoting gender equality and women's rights by shaping a specific subject image. This young woman with children is depicted as both a family member and a contributor to her household's well-being through resources, income, and the performance of her duties. She is seen as needing her rights because she lacks other sources of support. Despite the societal and legal constraints, she is understood to enjoy a certain degree of freedom—privately, intimately, economically, and sexually.

Drawing on Shenila Khoja-Mooli's (2018) work, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*, we see how narratives around young Muslim girls are constructed and reinforced through different actors and debates. These narratives shape and sustain a discourse that makes these subjects visible and "educable", often aimed at reforming family and social norms. While these practices promote individuality, they also serve to dismantle traditional family structures—yet simultaneously, they produce a system where the reproduction of the subject is maintained. This environment of continuous reproduction turns into a self-sustaining system, whose durability is thus structurally guaranteed.

Of course, and most importantly, it is the women's NGOs as actors that, through their agency, actively co-shape these narratives. However, the broader picture also includes the influence of international aid frameworks, public discourse, and local political cultures. These elements are interconnected and shape which stories are told and how they are embedded within society.

The so-called "poor young woman" narrative, which I also encountered during my fieldwork among women's NGOs, is not solely a product of NGO efforts. Instead, these gender myths are reproduced through grassroots activism, transnational feminist movements, and local women's rights advocacy. Additionally, such narratives are often generated and reinforced by public figures—politicians, journalists, NGO employees—and circulate within discourses of transnational human rights activism and international aid. These discourses tend to emphasize international interventions, legalistic development policies, and altruistic approaches, thus legitimizing and maintaining certain projections of women's roles and needs. They are largely shaped by hegemonies of funding and project dependencies, which grant them a form of structural permanence (Khoja-Moolji 2014, 2017, 2018; Khoja-Moolji and Karsan 2015).

Empirically, women often receive financial support in the form of microcredits to establish small businesses, which provide supplementary income for their households. However, repaying these credits often requires considerable time and effort, leading to a reduction in their available time for other responsibilities. While offering a financial boost, this can further hinder their participation in both public and private life (Batliwala and Dhanraj, 2007). Furthermore, the most common portrayal of women in international aid discourse depicts them as predominantly poor, rural, and uneducated. This depiction reinforces the myth that empowering women financially will automatically translate into broader social change—an assumption that oversimplifies complex realities. Such myths, discourses, and narratives tend to depoliticize women's rights by framing them as a matter of individual optimization within a neoliberal, market-driven system, rather than addressing the root causes of inequality. This gendered approach often emphasizes self-optimization and personal responsibility more than genuine empowerment or systemic change.

While NGOs often employ diverse approaches to navigate the complex social and religious landscape, their strategies for maneuvering services and involvement are far from uniform. This is especially evident when it comes to the role of religious figures and institutions

in community work. Understanding these pragmatic practices reveals the delicate balance NGOs must strike between maintaining their vision and adapting to local socio-political realities. For example, some organizations collaborate openly with religious leaders, while others adopt a much more cautious stance—avoiding direct engagement with religious actors altogether. As I will explore below, these maneuvering practices reflect broader tensions within the sector, where the absence of a strong state presence and the influence of sectarian affiliations shape how NGOs operate on the ground.

4.2.4 Maneuvering Practices

While NGOs often function as service providers in local communities, the implementation of their visions frequently requires navigating complex social and religious dynamics. To successfully deliver services and reach individual communities—especially women—many NGOs find it necessary to involve religious figures and organizations. However, this involvement takes different forms depending on the NGO's orientation, goals, and the prevailing local context. As an example, Khaled, an NGO project manager, provides an overview of some of the specific approaches employed by different women's NGOs:

LECORVAW works with religious figures but not on women's issues. PCA is considered "radical" in this sense that they have a radical approach to religious figures and their involvement and presence in projects. They reject working with them entirely. KAFA, on the contrary, is much more flexible, ABAAD is way too much flexible. They are different.

This variety of approaches underscores the sensitive and complex nature of NGO engagement with faith-based actors. I recall an informal conversation I had at the beginning of my fieldwork with Amer, a PCA employee and the husband of PCA's executive director, Mina. When discussing religion, faith, secularization, and NGO work, I noticed that Amer was often cautious and hesitant to speak openly about these topics. This was especially true regarding the involvement of religious actors in women's rights projects, as the personal status and authority of these individuals are entirely sanctioned by sectarian laws. NGO actors tend to hesitate to mention religion explicitly, even though it's often implicit in discussions during meetings.

Amer confirmed that these hesitations are justified; criticizing religion openly in public is neither prohibited nor normalized, but it is certainly not common—particularly in light of regional radicalization and fears that extremism might spill over into civil society. He added that the state is largely absent from these issues, and communities tend to organize themselves along political and sectarian lines, with religious affiliation playing a significant role. Furthermore, it is common for NGO actors to accept, tolerate, and support each other's faiths—seeing religion as a private, personal matter that is part of an individual belief system and something they are entitled to protect.

Despite this, many NGOs remain critical of religious institutions themselves, especially when those institutions have been infiltrated and dominated by sectarian interests, and when there is no strong state authority to regulate or oversee such religious influence.

Having explored the fundamental routines that sustain NGO operations behind the public-facing activities, it becomes clear that this bureaucratic and administrative framework plays a crucial role in shaping the organization's capacity to function and endure over time. These routines, though often perceived as mundane, are vital for maintaining institutional stability and long-term viability. Building on this understanding, the next focus will examine the inherent contradictions faced by women's NGOs—particularly how their long-term, social justice-oriented goals often clash with the demands and limitations imposed by bureaucratic routines, resource constraints, and the need for visibility and recognition in a competitive funding environment.

4.3 Maintenance and Administrative Work

Behind the visible work of NGOs—such as organizing events, conducting workshops, and engaging in advocacy—lies a substantial and often underappreciated layer of internal administrative and bureaucratic processes. These routines are fundamental for the organization's daily functioning and long-term sustainability. This behind-the-scenes work includes managing proposals, coordinating funding opportunities, and maintaining detailed documentation. Although these activities are often seen as mundane or repetitive, they are essential for securing future projects and ensuring long-term viability. As I will explore further, these institutional routines serve to uphold the organization's structure, preserve its capacity

to operate over time, and support its overarching goal of contributing to social change—albeit in ways that are often less visible than their advocacy campaigns or public events.

The bureaucracies of NGOs are, in essence, composed of paper—lists, documents, and reports that are crucial not only for internal management but also for the broader process of state-building and institutional recognition (Bernal and Grewal 2014). In this light, the importance of paperwork becomes clear: it is central to the crafting of a functioning organization, and by extension, a form of institutional statehood.

Moreover, these bureaucratic procedures are essential for examining, as I do in this chapter, the extent to which women's NGOs are truly engaging with their work when they are not directly campaigning or lobbying. The focus here is on the administrative and bureaucratic dimensions of NGO work, which are often necessary, highly collaborative, and inclusive aspects of daily routines in institutional activism. Managing proposals, for instance, involves researching funding sources, collecting background information on target localities and social contexts, and continuously updating training, workshops, and strategies to align with the evolving vision of the organization.

In recent years, NGO work has become increasingly professionalized, driven by the reproduction of expert knowledge. Smaller groups, to gain recognition and credibility, now often require fluency with technology, specialized jargon, and knowledge of international standards—attributes that make them more visible and attractive to donors and funding agencies. However, their limited financial resources hinder their ability to join major networks or platforms, and geographic remoteness from Beirut further constrains their access to opportunities. Since networking is crucial, especially in a context where many activities and opportunities are concentrated in Beirut, NGOs need to remain dynamic in seeking partnerships and visibility.²⁵

Organizing events, therefore, remains a vital strategy for boosting institutional visibility and self-promotion. Successful events not only enhance an NGO's reputation and public presence but also attract the support of potential donors and political actors. Such gatherings also serve as opportunities to inform stakeholders about ongoing work and developments in the field. In addition, NGO work increasingly demands capacity building and skill enhancement—particularly regarding administrative and bureaucratic structures. Staff and

²⁵ With few exceptions and outposts, the main offices are Beirut-based.

members do not organize workshops or trainings solely to meet project goals; they also do it to improve their own organizational skills and event management capabilities.

At the core of all these activities are the documents and procedures that shape the daily life of NGOs. These bureaucratic routines serve to sustain the organization itself. Institutional structures are designed with a long-term perspective and often outlive individual projects, continuing to operate even after specific goals have been achieved. This presents the first major contradiction NGOs face: women's issues—focused on rights and social justice—are inherently long-term and labor-intensive, involving many sectors and actors. These institutional processes involve numerous bureaucratic decisions, often politically motivated before being translated into legal frameworks, as discussed in chapter 3. Such procedures require significant amounts of time, money, and energy, with the aim of challenging and transforming the status quo.

It seems that NGOs seek to minimize reliance on short-term funding or expiration, instead focusing on sustainable, long-term social change.²⁶ They do not want to be caught in a cycle of constantly hopping from one project proposal to another due to insecure or uncertain funding. Yet, the reality for many, even well-established organizations, often contradicts this ideal. As staff members told me, NGOs sometimes shift internal funds between projects if one ends or loses funding. Their goal remains to provide long-term work opportunities, not only to ensure a stable situation but also to maintain a safe and inclusive working environment. Such spaces ideally offer opportunities for women (and sometimes men) from various social, class, religious, and regional backgrounds to come together—opposite to precarious spaces where rights and rules can be easily withdrawn.

For instance, although parental leave is legally mandated, there is no official jurisdiction or enforcement, which NGOs have addressed voluntarily by internal policies. These policies are not legally binding and cannot be challenged in court, but they can nonetheless create power differentials within organizations and serve as a show of force.

²⁶ Corruption may be widespread throughout the NGO sector, and not all NGOs have the ethical background I am describing here. I am not speaking for and to a homogenous and non-dynamic entity. It is not without reason that, throughout my fieldwork, people called the NGO sector a business sector and raised serious concerns about its sustainability. Some organizations exist only for their self-interest and less for the content of their work. According to my observation of those specific women's NGOs, I argue that the history of their origins and their survival—despite the many hurdles and compromises required of employees and directors alike—shows their determination and belief in their vision and work. They could have chosen another, less exhausting way. Furthermore, the purpose is more to question and look critically at the structural conditions NGOs operate under.

Furthermore, staying informed about ongoing developments in the field is crucial for both donors and NGOs. Gathering data, maintaining networks, and avoiding project duplication are vital strategies to ensure organizational efficiency and the continuous improvement of their work. These activities, although often repetitive and tedious, form the backbone of institutional maintenance, enabling NGOs to adapt to changing funding landscapes and policy environments.

In this context, networks and collaborations—such as joint lectures, conferences, and coalitions on women's issues—are not only avenues for advocacy but also essential tools for exchanging knowledge, avoiding duplication, and strengthening organizational resilience. These activities, integrated into everyday routines, highlight how bureaucratic processes underpin and sustain the social and political goals NGOs pursue, often behind the scenes, yet vital for long-term impact.

4.3.1 Counselling, Training, and Hotline

Next to the administrative and bureaucratic work that constitutes the daily life of NGOs, providing direct services to people remains a critical priority. These services form an integral part of any project; they serve as indicators, work styles, and evaluation criteria. Often, they justify the existence of the project activities and are listed as specific undertakings. Additionally, these services establish a direct connection to the grassroots target group defined by the project. NGOs frequently see themselves as the voice of the grassroots, closely connected to local knowledge and communities. However, capturing and representing the entire diversity of the grassroots is virtually impossible; NGOs can only speak for individual narratives and specific subjects within a particular group.

At the grassroots level, the NGO's obligation to its target group becomes most evident. To justify their ongoing operation, NGOs are required to report regularly on their administrative and bureaucratic activities. The services they offer should directly impact the group they aim to serve; they are the primary beneficiaries of the social change these projects seek to achieve.

Most NGOs based in Beirut have established outposts in other parts of Lebanon, which I refer to as "safe space centers". These centers typically provide office space and serve as

contact points or brokerages for the main offices. However, the more visible aspect of their work often occurs at a different location: a shelter or care house where people can seek refuge, protection, information, and services. The range of available support includes healthcare, education, housing, and legal counseling. Many of these centers operate hotlines that people in need can call for assistance on various issues.

The service formats vary widely—from awareness-raising workshops to group sessions and one-on-one counseling. For example, in cases of domestic violence, a common approach is case management. Here, a woman who has survived domestic abuse can speak with a social worker, and together they decide on her next steps. The centers also offer safe gathering spaces where women—and sometimes men—can meet, share experiences, and build solidarity in an environment free from social repression and fear.

Often, the descriptions of services are vague or framed in a way that leaves room for discretion. Center staff may describe workshops and activities in deliberately broad terms, allowing for multiple interpretations of what will actually take place. This ambiguity is sometimes a strategy used especially in smaller or rural areas, where conservative social norms and social control are strong. If certain topics—particularly those related to sexual health, reproductive rights, or gender roles—are perceived as too liberal or Westernizing, community leaders and influential figures might voice their reservations. This can lead to withdrawal of support, which puts the continuation of services and the NGO's work at risk.

However, such risks are not merely theoretical—they can directly affect the lives of those who come to the centers for help, making them vulnerable to social ostracism or violence. Eli, a project manager working in northern Lebanon, shared how his organization often arranges events for women aimed at improving economic independence and community participation. The goal is to enable women to create livelihoods, thus gaining greater agency within their families and communities. Volunteers at the centers, familiar with local customs and social networks, support these efforts by gathering information and recruiting women to participate under banners such as "economic progress" and "family welfare."

During these activities, women are informed about economic opportunities and other services. Brochures on sexual rights and family planning, including contraception methods, are distributed and explained in smaller groups. Eli also encourages women to gather informally, share experiences, and voice their concerns in community politics. The overarching

aim is to promote capacity building by establishing community committees and fostering local leadership.

Development tools allow NGOs to participate actively in political processes as well. For example, NGOs provide vocational training—such as tailoring, sewing, or carpentry—to respond to the rising youth unemployment and the large number of young people entering the job market. Other services include language classes, first aid training, and even innovative formats like playback theatre, which is improvisational, action-based, and designed to foster active participation and real-world engagement.

Partnerships with religious figures sometimes also play a role, especially when raising awareness about women's issues. NGOs focus on capacity building within communities and committees as a community-based approach. An example of this is a program supported by a European INGO that works with some Scheikhas (female religious leaders) in southern Lebanon. These women are trained and supported financially and through volunteers—known as "outreach workers"—who directly contact women within their communities. These outreach workers promote participation in the projects and are essential for reaching target groups that might otherwise be difficult to access.

While NGO activities in urban and rural communities focus on services such as economic empowerment, awareness campaigns, and community-building efforts, there are also smaller, more specialized centers operating in more marginalized contexts. These centers often serve as direct refuges for women and provide tailored support in environments where formal institutions and larger NGOs may have limited reach or resources. An example of such an initiative is the *Marta Y Mariam Center*, a shelter managed by a local Christian organization, which operates in a different but equally critical space of women's rights and protection.

Marta Y Mariam Center

Father Nabil is a Maronite²⁷ priest working in a remote community located on the coastline, two hours north of Beirut. He is the head of *the Marta Y Mariam center*, a local Christian NGO founded and funded by the sect and religious community. The center functions as a shelter for women seeking refuge, providing essential services to women who have been

²⁷ Maronite are an official, hegemonic Christian confessional group in Lebanon. The church relies on the Roman Canon and recognizes the Pope as the highest religious authority. However, it is a religious group modified by its place in the Middle East.

living on the streets and facing marginalization for years. Many of these women lack a social network they can rely on during difficult times, and many do not possess any form of identification. The center does not accommodate minors or women who wish to leave their husbands and families.

Father Nabil has observed that women accessing services at the center have been getting younger in recent years. Specifically, the number of women between 20 and 25 seeking shelter has increased. Despite this, Father Nabil welcomes and offers refuge to all women in need, regardless of their religion, citizenship, or immigration status. Currently, about half of the women in the shelter are Muslim, and the other half are Christians. However, there is a general trend toward a higher number of Muslim women. Some of these women are refugees from Syria or Palestine.²⁸

According to Father Nabil, it remains challenging to find a professional team capable of working effectively with these women. Specifically, recruiting qualified social workers for this type of work proves difficult. Martha Y Mariam operates in the shadow of more prominent NGOs. It is a small organization with limited funding, lacking the resources and expertise needed to craft funding proposals, compete with well-established organizations, and gain visibility among international donors. They do not strive for publicity; they do not even have a website. Instead, they collaborate with larger, more visible NGOs such as KAFA or RDFL, which have stronger connections and resources. When these NGOs receive information about women abandoned on the streets—information that matches the profile of women they are equipped to help—they refer the women to the shelter. Additionally, NGOs that operate hotlines for women often assess callers' situations and, if suitable, direct them to the center.

In this chapter, I focused on the institutionalized political activism and NGO work carried out by women's NGOs in Beirut. Both forms of activism and NGO work are integrated into the daily routines of these organizations, as well as in their cooperation with other actors. I examined the content and focus of their work; alongside the discourses they shape and implement through their activities. Part of this analysis involved understanding the staff behind these NGOs, as their professional identity as women's rights activists is closely tied to values rooted in international law, global rights discourses, and transnational activism. These

²⁸ Due to the Syrian civil war, Lebanon has become a refuge for Syrian refugees in recent years. Despite international and local support, Lebanon as the host country cannot provide enough support for the refugees, which pushes them into more precarious living conditions.

organizations navigate and negotiate these frameworks daily, both internally and in their collaborations, constructing solidarities that reflect their visions.

The ethnographic examples included in this chapter demonstrate that women's NGOs are already translating their visions of women's rights and empowerment into practice through active collaboration. The efforts to foster women's unity and equality are visible in the concrete partnership practices that unfold on the ground.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored how women's NGOs in Lebanon function as both institutional and visionary actors, shaping social and legal realities through their everyday practices. These organizations translate transnational ideas into localized activism, mediating between international norms and the complex socio-political contexts on the ground. Their work is driven by a combination of institutional routines, advocacy campaigns, and discursive strategies that project a vision of gender equality, rights, and social justice.

Simultaneously, women's NGOs operate within a dynamic space of negotiation—balancing their roles as mediators, experts, and self-representatives—while facing structural challenges such as bureaucratic constraints, resource dependencies, and sectarian influences. In their pursuit of long-term social change, they embody the figure of the "femocrat", combining institutional authority with transnational expertise, and actively constructing new social configurations and identities.

This chapter underscores that NGO work is more than service delivery; it is a contractual performance of visions and values rooted in ethical commitments, international discourses, and local realities. In doing so, women's NGOs not only influence policy and law but also create new spaces for activism and agency—spaces that are both embodied in daily routines and articulated through collective imaginaries. Their strategic navigation of these spaces reveals the complexity and ambition of contemporary women's rights activism in Lebanon, highlighting both their potential and the inherent contradictions of institutionalized advocacy.

Based on this understanding of how international frameworks and institutionalization influence grassroots activism, it is important to examine how these ideas and strategies are implemented in the public sphere. Through sit-ins, protests and public demonstrations, grassroots activism provides a vital space for expressing collective demands, asserting visibility and challenging societal and political norms.

The following chapter focuses on how activism on the ground is documented and visually represented, exploring who tells these stories and how images and narratives shape public perceptions of the struggle for women's rights in Lebanon. This analysis reveals how activists and organizations actively produce, contest and negotiate the visual and discursive spaces of activism, highlighting the importance of appearance, representation and ownership in the spaces where activism is most visibly performed.

5. "Who Owns What is Important on the Ground?" A Documentation of Activism in Lebanon

5.1 Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I examine how women's rights organizations work toward legal transformation. Each chapter builds towards answering this overarching question. This chapter, in particular, emphasizes that meaningful legal change relies on grassroots activism and organization. It also highlights the crucial role of documentation and representation—ensuring that images and narratives accurately reflect the activism, visibility, and agency of women's NGOs.

Moreover, I illustrate how concepts such as difference, diversity, and the increasing institutionalization of international law—via human rights frameworks, UN conferences, agencies, and treaties—have become central to local activism. These global influences are not simply external impositions; they are actively woven into grassroots practices, shaping strategies like sit-ins and protests, which in turn reinforce the formalization of women's rights activism. Over time, the design, work, and field of NGOs have become more professionalized (Hammami 2000), reflecting both adaptation to and negotiation with larger transnational structures that simultaneously expand possibilities and impose limitations.

The differences and heterogeneity in activism are shaped by intersectional characteristics such as class, gender, age, and regional or sectarian identity. These are conditioned by institutional structures and the historical contexts embedded within Lebanese society. However, grassroots activism often feeds on these differences, viewing them as potential sources of complementarity. Meanwhile, institutionalized and professionalized activism actively draws support from grassroots movements and younger generations of activists.

The historical context of women's activism in Lebanon—has led to the emergence of opposing stances—originating in diverse forms of organization established by women activists at different times and under various political and social conditions, including periods of societal division. The formal, institutional activism of NGOs reflects specific historical and political developments, notably Lebanon's independence, the remnants of the French mandate, and the postwar era of the 1990s. These developments have fostered a tendency to

organize around broad terms like "women's rights" or "women's issues", which serve as umbrellas to encompass a range of political motivations and interests.

Such dynamics suggest that women's activism in Lebanon is highly nuanced and fragmented, with ongoing disagreements about the movement's direction and priorities. Najid—the husband of Mireille, a prominent middle-aged women's activist and director of the NGO *Le Ressemblant Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises* (RDFL)—affirmed this perspective. I met Najid at a press conference in August 2016, attended mainly by women involved in NGOs, women's rights, or research; his assessment was clearly echoed in these contexts. Najid argued that issues and the activist groups themselves do not unify movements or groups in societies like Morocco and Tunisia. While emphasizing the disadvantages of segregated organizations, Nadira—a young activist in her early 20s, a student at the Lebanese American University (LAU), and a member of a secular civil society club—did not view this diversity as a serious practical obstacle. Instead, she believed that such differences should not hinder broader societal progress. Nadira sees activism as inherently multi-faceted, with contradictions and paradoxes existing side by side and even supporting one another.

In her view, Najid's perspective—that diversity complicates unity and institutions should homogenize differences—is an oversimplification. She argues this argument is often used to dismiss progressive and feminist positions, denying their legitimacy and relevance. As she puts it: "You wait until people say, 'See, they cannot agree. What is your priority? You cannot have a movement with no priority.' Yes, you can. You do not ask male activists or politicians to narrow their causes to just one, do you?"

The structure and practices of institutionalized NGOs can be seen to actively support and facilitate diversity within women's rights activism. Each subgroup of activism maintains its own networks, resources, and allies, which it can draw upon as needed. However, these elements do not function in isolation; rather, they operate collaboratively. As shown in previous chapters on campaign work and NGO activities, the various functions and levels of action are interconnected and mutually supportive. They form a symbiotic relationship: each component depends on and nurtures the others. Despite the heterogeneity on the ground, a shared set of values and a common vision—to advance women's rights and promote gender equality—provide a foundation for collective action and cooperation.

To return once again to the symbolic marriage of diversity and difference that emerges in the metaphor of organic emergence, the feminist theorist Donna Haraway's concept of

symbiogenesis and the interplay between natural science and activism (2017) provides insightful guidance. In her article, Haraway bridges the academic discipline of natural science research with activism for a non-human existence, highlighting the relevance of biological processes for understanding social formations. For example, while the organs of living creatures grow and develop at their own pace, they remain interconnected.

The organ of activism can be conceived as a conglomeration of chemical substances: capable of change, progression, division, and unification. This "organ" can (re-)produce and modify itself; external forces may induce it to mutate. Extending this metaphor, a body of activism can be compared to the skin—the largest organ of the human body. Although all parts are made of the same material, they display different shades and colorations depending on their location and exposure. Media anthropologist Zeynep Sariaslan (2019) further explores Haraway's terminology and uses it in an interpretative, symbolic way, linking it with the concept of assemblage—interpreted as social formation. This metaphor is employed here to illustrate how activism can be organized with nuance and brought back into a state of symbiosis.

As demonstrated in this chapter, documenting activism through images of demonstrations reveals the processual nature of documentation itself. It highlights characteristics such as generational differences and varying legal perspectives, which shape the collection of activism. This chapter examines the documentation of activism in three selected demonstrations. The analysis begins with two photographs, each depicting a different event (a third image could not be analyzed due to limited field access). Ethnographic documentation encompasses both the preparation for each event and post-event processing. The classification and analysis of this documentation are approached from a researcher's perspective.

Furthermore, the chapter explores local activism on the ground, which develops symbiotically, with each part forming a heterogeneous and diverse social organization. It is important to clarify that the focus here is solely on women's activism, not an overarching women's movement. As noted at the outset, no direct connections are made to the literature on social movements, nor is the term "civil society" used unless it is empirically self-assigned. Lebanese women's rights activism is characterized as feminine in nature but is often perceived as masculine, given the male-dominated fields of politics and law (Weiss 2014).

The chapter is divided into two main parts: first, a brief overview of the history of women's activism paired with feminist politics during the state's formation and its aspirations. This contextualizes when, how, and under what circumstances women's activism in Lebanon was publicly mobilized—especially in relation to politics—before evolving into its current form as institutionalized, NGO-affiliated women's rights activism. The focus is on legal and generational differences that have developed historically. Additionally, the stages of the international women's movement are discussed, conceptualized as waves (Aikau et al. 2007), with particular attention to how Lebanon's women's activism responded to each wave, adapting it to its unique context.

Finally, the second part centers on the representation of work through images, documents, and the documentation process itself.

5.2 Women's Rights and Feminist Politics in Lebanon

"I do not think it is a Western agenda. There is a history of women's rights. It is also Lebanese owned as well, not only the Western agenda. The ownership belongs to Lebanese activist history as well", said Zara, an employee of an international agency based in Beirut, when we discussed feminist politics and vernacularized women's rights activism. Activists, scholars, and NGO employees in Lebanon acknowledge the history of women's activism in Lebanon as one of the most noticeable and influential in the Arab world. At the same time, Lebanon ranks last when it comes to women's participation's rate in politics and first when it comes to gender gaps, according to latest numbers from UNDP (2016), as well as World Bank (2004) and WEF (2016) statistics for the Arab region.²⁹ To fully understand the current landscape, it is essential to examine the historical and institutional development of women's activism in Lebanon. The following sections are organized around four distinct waves; each linked to broader international movements but also shaped by Lebanon's unique political and social conditions. This temporal framing helps highlight how global feminist discourses have been adapted and transformed within local contexts, resulting in a nuanced and multi-layered feminist landscape.

²⁹ For further information see Avis 2017.

This section examines the historical and institutional development of women's rights activism and feminist politics in Lebanon. The chapter is divided into four parts, each corresponding to one of the four waves³⁰ of the international women's movement, as identified by UN agencies and mediated through transnational women's rights and feminist networks. Analyzing these waves reveals the links, adaptations, and transformations in the global women's movement and grassroots feminist politics over time.

The history and developments of women's activism in Lebanon can also be segmented into four distinct phases. These phases are shaped by the rise of transnational networks, international movements, and the increasing interconnectedness brought about by globalization. The classification into waves is a widely used framework, frequently applied in academic discourse, media debates, journalism, and activism alike.

The waves and their partitioning refer to classifications that are also applied in international and translocal academic discourses and other public debates (e.g., journalism and activism). The first wave started with Lebanon's independence in 1943; the second appeared as a response to the Arab Israeli war in 1967 and the emergence of a new, "leftist" political movement, heavily inspired by Marxist and socialist readings and approaches. The third wave emerged in post-war Lebanon, a result of the aims of reconciliation and peacebuilding. This wave was strongly connected to the rise of NGOs and their institutional professionalization. The fourth wave appears to be a reaction to the anti-globalization and anti-war movements of the early 2000s.

Lebanon's independence marked a pivotal turning point in the evolution of women's movements in the country. Although a women's movement existed already in the 1920s—largely inspired by Egypt's Arab Renaissance and, before that, Napoleon—these early efforts were primarily led by men. During that decade, two overarching feminist networks formed: one Christian charitable organization, and a Muslim coalition representing Arab and leftist political parties. I will now describe the most important developments in women's rights activism and feminist movements in Lebanon, organized by each wave.

³⁰ I am aware that this wave classification is contested in both activist and scholarly discourses. I do not elaborate further on this issue in this dissertation. For further reading, see Janowick 2008; Hewit 2010; Nicholson 2010. I continue to use the wave classification because those I spoke with did—they had aligned themselves with the idea. Here I predominantly rely on an article by Bernadette Daou (2015), a well-known Lebanese activist. In her article, she gives a very detailed historical outline of the history of the women's movement in Lebanon, which I summarize in the section on women's rights activism.

5.1.1 First Wave

The first wave started with an aspiration to independence. First-wave feminists contemplated the ending of colonialism. In 1950, in the aftermath of Lebanon's independence, the two networks mentioned above crossed the sectarian divide and merged into one umbrella association: *The Lebanese Council of Women* (LCW). The merger also represented discontent among the women in those networks. Together with men, women participated in the political struggle for independence from the administration of the French mandate. They supported the political desire for an independent, unified state until the independence of the state of Lebanon. Unfortunately, after independence, it quickly became clear to women that the feminist agenda of men was not in their favor, furthering neither their interests nor their ability to participate in political decision-making. The struggle for political rights was closely linked to the quest for an independent administration and political systems that were exclusively male dominated. The right to vote (as well as the right to run for office) was only granted to women in 1952, after two feminist networks, which had been active since 1920 and were founded together with the sectarian groups mentioned above, joined forces to advance their political demands. The right to vote (and to stand for election) was reserved for men. Women received their political rights in 1952, after two feminist networks, which had been active since 1920 and were founded along with the sectarian groups mentioned above, joined forces and united for political reasons.

Political agendas later included women's participation, but only superficially and with the goal of "modernizing" and "Westernizing" women according to Christian property agendas (Daou 2015: 58; Shoukeir 2002: 36).

Though women were assigned tasks related to political activities and were even visible in that work, it is difficult to call such a development feminist. If women engaged in political work, their tasks were limited to charity work and ceremonial occasions. The women's approaches were not radical ones that denounced classicism and the economic inequality that women experienced. Instead, their demands supported and even benefited the political status quo, which was grounded in the elitist, sectarian political system (Sukkar 2003: 53). Insecurity, confusion, and the potential for identity conflicts, which started with independence and

continued in the foundation of the sectarian political system, characterized the attempt to form a unified, national female identity.³¹

5.1.2 Second Wave

Leftist collectivist aspirations and ideologies such as the Pan-Arab movement, such as those underpinning the Pan-Arab movement, which arose as a response to Egypt's defeat in the Arab Israeli conflict of 1967, influenced the second wave. In general, feminist and women's rights organizations were either associated with Marxism or inspired by it. The idea of national identities inspired mainstream attitudes and ideas in the newly formed states in the region. In contrast to the earlier colonial and occupation-related power structures and political goals, women's rights activists and feminist groups increasingly focused on building a common national identity within the borders of the state.

Nevertheless, Egypt suffered from doubts about the idea of national unity throughout its defeat. There result was a widespread shift from a nationalist perspective to a leftist one. This wave marked an increase in transnational interconnectedness. The movement of students at that time led to the dissemination of a significant amount of French and American academic discourse to the Middle East region. In light of the questioning of nationalist aspirations and prospects that the Egyptian disappointment invoked, Pan-Arab, leftist movements and ideas moved to the forefront of feminist agendas for women's activism. Transnational networks supported activists in France and the US.

Despite the shift from a nationalist perspective to a leftist one, women's rights activism's concerns remained bourgeois. The second wave ended with the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. The women's movement, its organizations, and their established networks put themselves into the service of humanitarian action, providing important services to people during wartime.

³¹ See Joseph (1999).

5.1.3 Third Wave

The third wave marked the end of both the long civil war in Lebanon and the Cold War. It appeared when the Iron Curtain between the spheres of influence of the former USSR and the United States fell. At the same time, this period also marked a beginning. Before the 1990s with global and local events of historical significance affected the activist work on the ground. Women's rights defined by gender category and definition were not addressed in the years after independence—women's activism instead mobilized in service of humanitarian and social or political issues.

Grassroots women's rights groups voluntarily engaged in less formal and less organized political activities. With increasing institutionalization, professional groups defined their goals and activities, always aware of being part of a global movement. Through the NGO professionalism and institutionalization and post-war agreements in the early 1990s, women's NGOs worked on gender and sexual violence. International conventions and agencies flourished, as did transnational networks and movements. Such development went hand in hand with the booming professionalization and NGO-ization of actions facilitated by less-bureaucratic former grassroots organizations primarily concerned with providing services. In this context of post-war society and its peacebuilding prospects, feminist politics and agendas received a new color. Through negotiations in international fora and transnational network settings, international agendas and donor interest have taken on greater prominence. Rights language shifted to that compromise. Women's matters became global matters and norms and were embedded in international discourse. New ideas discussed during the conference, such as gender-based violence and gender equality, became trendy. The Beijing conference in 1995 was influential in global women's activism; Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) convention one year later. The sharing of experiences invoked and spread knowledge, which activists utilized to hold accountable those states that had ratified CEDAW. Even if women "only" had an advisory role, women's activists' institutional expertise was necessary to implement CEDAW. The UN commission mandating CEDAW recommended to implement the UN convention, which the state of Lebanon was a signatory of. This coordinated global mobilization of women's activism and rights advocacy pushed governments and international aid agencies to create mechanisms and structures and commit resources to address the issue. With the campaign "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" ([UN 2020 URL](#)), they propelled the UN

conference on human rights (Vienna 1993) to integrate gender perspectives and women's human rights into the UN framework (Silliman 1999: 4).

Consequently, political parties and the government formed organizations such as the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), another umbrella association for women's affairs. NCLW, as I mentioned in the previous chapter on campaign work, plays an essential, influential role in legislative procedures. Its members are mostly wives of Members of Parliament (MPs) or government ministers. The members have strong ties within the political landscape as well as with grassroots groups and the public. They consider themselves part of civil society and international aid organizations such as foreign embassies and INGOs. NCLW was founded by the Lebanese state one year after Beijing. As Daou said, "the specialization of feminist NGOs appears following the institutionalization of certain programs run by the government" (2015: 60). In the aftermath of and as a response to CEDAW ratification, the Beijing conference, and NGOs' growing interest in gender and development, Lebanon was obliged to institutionalize specific structures.

Thanks to transnational activism and solidarity, the historical development of women's rights follows a global trajectory. Local transformation processes navigate both local historical events and broader developments, such as the global political economy and the capitalist and (neo-)colonial system.

5.1.5 Fourth Wave

The fourth and last wave centered on the emergence of two new umbrella associations: the National Committee for the Follow up of Women's Issues (CFUWI) and The *Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women* (LECORVAW). The Beijing conference's impact was noticeable in shifts in jargon, terminology, methods, and approaches that were instituted by the UN (and the conference itself). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) movement and *Helem*, the first officially recognized NGO working on gay and queer issues, which was founded in Beirut, became visible in transnational women's rights and queer networks. Formerly, older and more established organizations had neglected to problematize issues around sexual and body rights. For Daou (2015: 62), "it was a radicalization that borrowed heavily from the standards and norms of donors, without real

impact on the patriarchal structures of the local society." Some younger women have discussed lesbian identity in relation to women's rights activism in their circles. These women had access to higher education at private (and internationally influenced) universities, such as the American University of Beirut (AUB), Université Saint-Joseph (USJ), and the Lebanese American University (LAU). These institutions are spaces where networks can flourish, making them ideal for founding associations, *clubs*³² and collectives. Students develop and debate ideas, actions, and attitudes—in other words, exchange information. However, such activist networks are not-unjustly accused of remaining in elitist and bourgeois environments. Dina confirmed that activist groups and clubs are considered exclusive. However, attempts are being made to change this by reaching out to potential activists with a range of different institutional and intellectual affiliations. Dina mentioned a group of middle-aged women who meet weekly in a neighborhood just outside Beirut to exchange ideas and discuss issues. The members of this group, which they have dubbed The Spinsters' Club, promote it by means of handwritten posters, which they hang mainly in hair salons and beauty parlors.

The institutionalization phenomena are twofold: on the one hand, there is criticism of the professionalization that an increase in the number of NGOs has spurred on; on the other, the institutionalized professionalism helped to use the tools to make claims noticeable, being capable of participation while mastering predetermined tools. It appears as a potential for implementation. It strengthens the role of the advisor, who is perceived as an expert and approached accordingly. A significant number of activists expressed concern that feminist issues might become depoliticized, more business-related projects than products of a vision. These concerns accompanied the paradigm shift in women's activism that CEDAW had initiated. Activists were skeptical, concerned that rights discourse could minimize and narrow "the struggle".

A generalized description of feminist politics and women's rights activism in Lebanon represents a constant repositioning of both activism itself and the actors and subgroups within it, which oppose the political and legal systems while negotiating international standards and politics as well as transnational influences within activism. Moreover, I see overall mainstream feminist discourse in politics, the public realm, and transnational women's rights activism as having shifted towards that of advocacy work, putting the language and discourse of rights at

³² A *club* in this context means an activist group. Broadly used by activists, it is an informal but institutionalized form of a group, connected to and derived from a university or school platform.

the center. Many activists and experts in the fields of international aid and advocacy noticed the transformation brought about by NGOs' professionalization and the increased institutionalization of organizations in local settings. Rights-based activism and legal reform became priorities for women's activists and their programs. I contend that such developments marked the beginning of law being considered a vehicle for life contexts, aligning with early attempts to articulate a feminist political agenda.

Lebanese women's rights activists increasingly used rights and legal consciousness as tools to defeat injustice. Mona (KAFA's director) and Mina (PCA's director) endorsed this, as these were the "last and only" tactics economically disadvantaged people could employ to improve their living conditions. Topics related to body politics—such as reproduction and questions around a women's role as a caring mother attached to family structure—became political agendas in service of preserving the image of the traditional, intact family. This occurred in transnational and local women's rights campaigns, such as those on child marriage and nationality law. I argue that women's rights had become more mainstream by this point in time, which can be counted as a success. However, politicians could also utilize women's rights, putting them at the forefront of their own causes in order to justify them. However, this served only their own political interests, with women merely token representations or objects meant to generate sympathy. For example, women's rights and empowerment can be used to legitimize rhetoric or as an instrument of male-dominated agendas like promoting family values to reduce or enhance the birth rate and influence body politics and images. Their plans promote religious or nationalist ideologies and advance global market forces (Copelon and Petchesky 1995, 365).

For Dina, changing the law is both a long-term endeavor and a matter of urgency. She says the most vulnerable women in society often consider the law their only recourse. In contrast, women in a more stable socioeconomic environment might find other options for coping with challenging circumstances. Another young activist name Tala, an employee of the women's NGO ABAAD, mentions that the political arena has also adapted in favor of women's concerns over the past five to ten years. In summary, I believe that the tactic of addressing women's issues within the agendas of political parties needs to be carefully examined against the backdrop of those parties' tendency to instrumentalize women's issues for their own purposes.

Having presented the various phases of feminist development in Lebanon within the context of historical and local continuities and political changes, I will now explore the different strands of women's rights activism and feminist movements. These diverse approaches contribute to diversify the landscape of activism. To begin, I will examine the differences between generational perspectives.

5.3 Differences in and from Generational Perspectives

"In Lebanon, we do not have a real feminist movement; we have women's NGOs. There are many, but they are not feminist organizations. The women's NGOs are very good at mobilizing. They are the strongest group within civil society groups, [they have the] best capacity. However, they are not linked to feminism", says Hadya, a political science professor and longtime activist. This suggests that there are diverging opinions among women's activists and within women's rights activism about what is meant by a feminist agenda or politics. Nadira points out the lack of a feminist agenda in women's NGOs and their work. For her, women's NGOs and their activism haven't incorporated feminism. NGOs do not have enough of a feminist focus in their work and on their agendas, she believes—their real priority is the bureaucratic requirements of financial donors³³; they are more concerned with these requirements and the relationships they cultivate than they are with the grassroots. Dina is an activist and works for an international NGO. She claims that NGOs do not represent the grassroots; they merely pretend to. She sees this a vicious cycle. She says that an NGO activist's duties are an addition to the responsibilities within her family, which reinforces what Maya, a women's rights campaign leader in her late 20s, said about activism. According to Maya, activism creates space for action anytime and anywhere.

Activists can be NGO employees too, as they have responsibilities to their families; wage work contributes to the family's finances. In contrast to Dina, who sees NGO activity as secondary to family obligations, Maya sees NGO activity as a way to fulfil her family obligations while still performing activism. Maya's priority is to financially support her family, whereas for Dina, NGO activity is a sideline to family obligations such as relationship maintenance,

³³ A detailed analysis of the complexity and the asymmetrical relationship between money donor and donees follows in chapter 6.

household chores, and childcare. In this context, I assume that Dina refers to the kind of charity activities mainly done by political parties and their associations.

Maya doesn't believe that activism has to be a full-time labor of love that precludes the possibility of self-care. Instead, activists generally consider activism complementary to an individual, yet structurally manifested decision. In this form, institutionalized activism is more than a job in which one provides a service; it is a visionary, ethical vocation and a responsibility. I explain this in detail in chapter 4.

This has been previously mentioned in the context of civil rights efforts and legal reforms, which NGOs and women's activists often distinguish from those related to European civil law. While these perspectives on European civil law may be largely influenced by Enlightenment ideas, they also reflect structural legacies from the period of French colonial mandate in law and politics.

Therefore, the progress made by these newer generations of activists could be seen as an opportunity to adapt and interpret international standards in ways that align with their own social visions and contexts. Here, "progress" does not imply Westernization or "civilized" standards; rather, it relates to taking action, exercising responsibility, and fostering societal faith. Progress should aim to improve people's living conditions in a grassroots manner, led by groups of youth who tend to hold more progressive and critical views on heteronormativity and gender roles.

The aftermath of the 2017 women's march that I document in this chapter showed precise visions of where women's actions should lead. Dina defines the goal as a shared, diverse but equal, politically correct, conscious, and aware state of mind. Hadya is part of a generation of educated activists connected to academic and political party networks in Lebanon that still promote women's political rights within the political landscape. The primary goal of their feminist political agenda is a quota for women in politics, one that is applied to Parliament, boards of directors, committees, and the judiciary. Dina, I assume, identifies herself more with the fourth wave of the contemporary international women's movement and women's rights activism. This wave deals more with a queer feminist agenda that resists social heteronormativity and aims at an intersectional inclusion of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. She considers Hadya's generational and institutional identification mainly with NCLW exclusive, old-fashioned, and evidence that she is unwilling to entertain ideas that are

newer than Hadya and her contemporaries. "They still have their block, they cannot even agree on a quota", Dina says. She continues:

Their meetings are closed and inaccessible for the public. They have internalized how to vote as men do in the households; it is male subordination. Wives of parliamentarians are the roots of oppression. This organization [NCLW] benefits directly or indirectly from [political] sectarianism. Political parties have women and youth branches. Please give them a committee, and they shut up.

As previously mentioned in earlier chapters, NGOs often present themselves publicly as apolitical and anti-sectarian, as if they are detached from the organization of charities. These features are seen as distinctive oppositions to the structures of dominant and authoritative institutions. However, it is important to consider that accountability to financial donors often conflicts with domestic political affairs and connections, which have partially shaped the activism landscape in terms of institutional structure. The work of NGOs and their institutionalized activism form a part of grassroots movements and contribute to activist actions and development by creating narratives, subjects, and spaces for engagement.

Building on the earlier discussion of generational differences, these differences go beyond mere age or length of involvement in the development of women's rights activism within institutions. They are layered, encompassing asymmetries and relationships. Younger activists represent a new development within the context of international and transnational women's movements and their networks. These younger voices face different ideas and situational realities than those of established women's NGOs that are recognized both within Lebanon and internationally.

According to Dina, "New ideas are always essential and welcomed. You have to examine their contextualization more closely and ask yourself how they have developed further, and what approaches and discourse have influenced them." Accordingly, questions such as how long a specific discourse on women's rights and development has persisted and why most projects, organizations, and approaches continue to adhere to it remain central and still require further exploration.

As shown earlier in section 5.1 (covering the development of institutional women's organizations through feminist politics and international women's movement projections), grassroots activism addressing women's struggles in the public and political spheres existed prior to the 1990s and the postwar period. During this time, the international aid industry

became more professionalized through the increasing number of NGOs and the implementation of the UN's mainstreaming approach to violence (UN 2002: URL). This rising professionalism and institutionalization pushed former local volunteer groups to become more organized and sophisticated. Local organizations evolved into overarching NGOs or political parties, serving both representational and practical purposes. These women's organizations often engaged in charity work, which in turn supported their political interests. Younger activists such as Dina, Maya, Paula, and Nadira criticize this close alignment with institutional systems, which they see as playing into the hands of the political elite, inadvertently helping to sustain sectarianism and those who benefit from it in Lebanon. Based on these observations, intergenerational conflicts seem to stem from an institutional dilemma rooted in class divisions, which have been reinforced by political sectarianism.

Dina's statement above indicates how generational differences can make it challenging to find a common denominator in women's rights activism from which to work together and advocate and act for the same cause. Generational differences often feed on institutionalized and organizational barriers. However, many activists are reassured that women's activism must go together, despite differences, asymmetries of varying degrees of visibility and representation. Institutional visibility as an organization is essential for activism with its subgroups, which often still run along with the generational establishment.

5.4 Differences in Legal Perspectives

In addition to generational differences, which I have previously mentioned are influenced by institutional developments, historical circumstances and politics, another possible explanation for the fragmentation of women's rights activism into distinct segments lies in differing perspectives on the law. Specifically, this pertains to family and personal status laws: not all activist groups advocate for a complete abolition of the existing laws, which vary according to sectarian affiliation. The following section examines further such differences.

Hind, an activist, academic, and longstanding NCLW member (and friend of Hadya) pointed out that divisions already existed between those women's rights activists who sought a dissolution of the personal status and religious laws and those that aspired to a unified civil law. This demarcation from one another intensified shortly after Lebanon's independence in

1943, especially in the 1950s. During this period, women's rights activist groups were increasingly run along political and sectarian lines. Institutionalized women's rights activism was also funded and supported primarily by political and sectarian groups, as Hind explained to me. Such divisions had already led to fragmentation within women's rights activism. As an example, Hind mentioned the Lebanese Council of Women (LCW), a coalition of women's NGOs founded in the 1950s, which splintered into subgroups due to different ways of looking at rights. Within the group, there were two main camps: One wanted to secularize the personal status law and turn it into civil law, while the other wanted to do away with "confessionalism" but keep the religious personal status law and craft a unified law beyond confessional borders. This latter group wanted to reject the sectarian system and focus on political power and proportional distribution accordingly. This perspective acknowledged that reforms within existing structures—and those held by individuals with such views—might be perceived as reformist. In addition to these reformist and confessionalist positions, there was also a conservative stance, which favored making changes while remaining within the boundaries of the current system. A reformist approach can also mean doing things step by step, with a goal of reform rather than radical abolishment. For instance, a reformist could favor a law that regulates early marriage instead of prohibiting it. Reformists were against the total abolishment of the sectarian system; instead, they wanted to achieve reforms and social change from within. Counter positions to reformists were approaches that demanded a strict prohibition on alliances that were overly friendly, beneficial, or sustaining to the system. In activist jargon, such positioning is referred to as radical. Hadya, an academic, thinks that the positions of reformists and abolitionists have become less polarized and more fully developed since this separation, the clear gap between them closing steadily over time. The majority of both reformists and abolitionists became aware of supporting the family code changes in the first place. Therefore, there was not simply one group made up of supporters and another of opponents, the former seeking to completely abolish civil law and the latter committed to reforming family laws with the caveat that the structures should be changed but not eliminated. Neither group wants to fundamentally and foremost deal with legal issues and family law and problematize it.

Most activists I spoke with agree that the civil war set back women's rights issues, as well as their public positioning and the roles they played in public discourse. In the absence of men, women had to assume the role of providers for their families by working in the fields,

while continuing to serve as caregivers and maintaining family cohesion. Among activists, disagreements persisted regarding the extent to which international law should be incorporated into the domestic legal framework, as Lebanese activist Bernadette Daou (2015: 62) acknowledges:

[T]he resistance to fully apply human rights was not only manifested by the state, but it was also reflected inside the Lebanese feminist space between organizations defending a radical perspective to those claiming a more record of expertise.

In previous pages, I provided an overview of feminist developments in Lebanon within the context of political, local, as well as internationally and transnationally recognized phases of women's rights activism. These were connected to historical and political continuities, as well as current movements and demands by women's rights activists, NGOs, and their professionalization. Particular emphasis was placed on the diversity of approaches within the movement, including generational differences and varying understandings of rights and justice that are central to empowerment and emancipation. I will explore how these dynamics are represented and documented in practice. This will involve not only an analytical description of two images but also the presentation and interpretation of three different protest forms.

5.5 Finding the Right Image

In this section, I document three different sit-in formats employed in women's activism on the ground. Each format possesses distinct characteristics relevant to representing women's activism, such as diversity and difference. The understanding that documents can be seen as "artifacts of modern knowledge" originates from Australian anthropologist Anneliese Rile (2006). Knowledge is continuously adapted and shape-shifted as it travels through networks of anthropologists, practitioners, and actors involved—whether inside, outside, or on the margins—contributing to its production within specific contexts.

In this context, images of two of the three protests I catalog in the following pages are analyzed. These interpretations aim to shed light on the intersubjective experiences I, as an

anthropologist, interpret and organize based on my interests and within the context of my analysis.

Women's activism leaders often refer to the actions they organize as *sit-ins*³⁴, a term that suggests obstruction or interruption. When referring to marches, I adopt that term because that is how the organizers describe them. The term "sit-in" however, implies movement and the act of making oneself visible and heard at a specific location. Such demonstrations can begin peacefully but may become violent due to the intentions of the protesters or clashes with police or opposing forces.

Beyond aesthetics, documentation represents the reproduction of situated knowledge and its material expression. I also extend the concept of modern artifacts to include the processes involved in documenting and creating these representations. In my understanding, photographs or images of an event are not only visual records but can also serve as templates for generating documents necessary to record and communicate these actions.

Image Documentary Analysis

I consider representation through images a means of documentation. To illustrate this, I have selected two images of sit-ins that depict women's rights activities in public spaces. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, a third image could not be analyzed due to limited access to the field.

Building on the image analysis, I will combine Riles' concept of documentation and material artifacts with an approach borrowed from the English artist and poet John Berger. In his book *Ways of Seeing* (2008 [1972]), Berger explores how telling, seeing, and narrating can serve as formats for translation. His artistic perspective challenged dominant paradigms of image perception and the ways images are conveyed within artistic and intellectual contexts (2008). Berger's approach has influenced many disciplines in art and culture, encouraging a critical gaze on (re-)presentations through visualization.

According to Berger, perception is grounded in conventions, leaving limited space for unconventional or individual interpretations. The meaning of an object is itself a reproduction derived from an original. As Berger states, "The meaning of an image can be changed

³⁴ Although it was considered a sit-in, I will use "women's march" because the activists called it that.

according to what you can see beside it or what comes after it" (1972 URL 19:33). To interpret what we see, we rely on our own experiences and the relationships we create with the image. Therefore, the connection between the image we produce and the knowledge we form shapes our understanding of the image and its representation.

Following this line of thought, Berger suggests that image production is inherently manipulative, serving and mirroring its own interests. It is mystifying and incomplete; its value is often driven by financial motives—especially in the case of art images such as paintings and photographs.

I find Berger's approach particularly useful for understanding materialist feminist theories. From a materialist perspective, feminist traditions focus on technologies and objects that generate specific productive arrangements, from which voices can emerge (Ferguson 2017: 277). Similarly, Clare Hemmings (2001: 102) refers to these as "replays", emphasizing both the materiality and content of documents. This approach highlights the parameters of subjectivity and "the process of knowing and speaking" (Ferguson 2017: 277). In this context, observing and seeing are political acts, echoing Berger's intended critique. In the following, I will analyze two images from two different protests.

Women's March



Image 3 - Activists at the 2017 Women's March in Beirut (Knecht 2017).

This picture is a snapshot taken during the Women's March in 2017, highlighting homemade and handwritten placards. The event is organized as a march, with participants in constant motion—moving from one street to another, and from one neighborhood to the next. In the design of this march, it is essential to be not only visible but also heard. Chanting and the noise level created by the crowd are highly relevant. To maintain engagement, some individuals assume the role of animating and motivating the group. The chants serve as a unifying element within this heterogeneous assembly. Media outlets are present to cover and document the demonstration.

Compared to the sit-in described below, it seems to me that the activists in this march are more active—more forceful in their efforts to attract attention. These activists may also have more opportunities to express themselves as they wish—such as through their placards—than those involved in the sit-in do.

PCA's Sit-in at the Ministry of Work



Image 4 - Activists at a PCA Sit-In in Beirut (Knecht 2017).

This second image depicts a sit-in led by PCA in front of the Ministry of Work. The purpose of analyzing these images is to identify similarities and differences between the two and to demonstrate how activist actions materialize in each context. The focus is on representation and the material presentation of campaigns—the analysis also considers the images themselves as material artifacts, capturing moments in time.

In this photo, the campaign leader, Lama, is positioned at the center of the image. She is speaking to the public and media, becoming the focal point of attention. She represents those gathered around her, who have been harmed by the legal restrictions the campaign seeks to abolish. The participants are the main actors, and their narratives and personal involvement serve as artifacts of legal norms and practices. The image evokes an "imagined community", in Benedict Anderson's terms (1991, 1983). The people appear homogeneous, united by shared life circumstances and constrained by the same restrictions. They are also bound together through common experiences of economic, legal, educational, and social discrimination—they have been marginalized or rejected due to processes of othering.

From an intersectional perspective, the group is internally heterogeneous, even though the campaign's focus is on women's rights and the NGO identifies as a women's organization. The placards and Lama's speech emphasize the materiality of women's rights claims. Their demands include economic equality and participation, highlighting that without citizenship, access to education and economic opportunities remains limited, if granted at all. These demands reflect basic human needs essential for a good life. The placards are handwritten, and multiple microphones are visible—highlighting the organized nature of the event. While the individuals in uniform in the background (highlighting a sense of uniformity) are important—their focus is on the campaign's core issues—they also support the campaign by sharing stories, information, and symbolic representations, which in turn sustain the work of the organization within bureaucratic and institutional frameworks.

My observations and data suggest that this sit-in exemplifies an attempt to incorporate grassroots voices in line with PCA's understanding. This reinforces rhetoric about the critical role of grassroots engagement—used when discussing NGO projects aimed at raising awareness and advancing women's rights. As the term implies, "grassroots" refers to being rooted in local communities, emphasizing the importance of everyday life concerns. In their development and humanitarian work, NGOs often present themselves as grassroots-based organizations, claiming to represent local voices.

Images develop their own dynamics, gaining momentum, power, and the potential to mobilize. They do so within public space, where sit-ins function as a visual and performative analysis of claim-making. Such collective assertions often utilize "silent politics", and NGOs project visibility and voice, engaging specific audiences and leveraging social capital.

Lobbying and mobilization are central to campaigning. Campaign leaders reach out to the public, aiming to mobilize active participation. They target affected populations to expand support, hoping to amplify marginalized voices and visually represent them to a wider audience.

Another key strategy is securing media support. Campaigns are covered through traditional outlets—television, radio, newspapers—and through printed materials like billboards and posters. Lama explains, "Media is an important partner within civil society, even if they do not always work in our interests." Although Lebanon is small, it boasts numerous media outlets divided along organizational, sectarian, and political lines. For example, MTV covered the early marriage campaign but not the citizenship campaign. Social media plays an

increasing role among the youth, helping to expand the campaign's reach and visibility in digital public discourse. However, social media is often more effective for broadcasting than for forums of genuine dialogue. Dina describes social media activism as "spiraling out of control." Lama shared a story illustrating this: in 2012, the prime minister promised to grant women equal rights regarding the passing on of nationality. A year later, the promise was revoked after the ministerial committee, established to address this issue, decided to undermine women's rights, offering only minimal services instead.

In 2013, following Lama's sit-in in front of Parliament, acting Prime Minister Tammam Salam announced on Facebook that he would revisit the nationality issue. Lama also organized a sit-in in front of a women's blood donation center, which the Red Cross attended, supporting the campaign.

Activism serves its own purpose by promoting representation, visibility, awareness, and attracting attention to the cause. Both images depict actions that are embedded within ongoing processes, both preceding and following the moments captured. I believe the women's march appears less rehearsed than one of the NGO sit-ins, as it has been performed in a similar manner multiple times before. In contrast, the sit-in is a recurring element of campaign work, often taking place at the same site—such as the Parliament building or government offices—and serves primarily to repeatedly draw attention to a specific issue.

While the march also aims to unite people around a common vision, it gathers different subgroups with diverse ideas. The activist groups and especially the leading committee select which topics to emphasize and invoke through chants. Compared to PCA's campaign sit-in, the women's march shows a more diverse representation of subgroups. The PCA sit-in image emphasizes aesthetic uniformity and professionalism, creating a cohesive visual identity. In contrast, the image of the women's march reflects a heterogeneous, improvisational vibe, with a sense of spontaneity and diversity in its visual presentation.

Following the analysis of these two images depicting different protests, I will now document three additional protests, including their preparatory and follow-up activities. These three protests have been selected in line with the previous discussion on generational differences and the professionalization of activism within NGO activities. The first represents a protest led by older activists, the second originates from a younger generation, and the third was organized by an NGO.

5.5.1 // The Older Generation's Sit-In //

5.5.1.1 The Sit-In Is Planned

The National Council of Lebanese Women (NCLW) organized the sit in. The evening before, Lamia, the campaign leader, met with representatives from NCLW. NCLW is an elder local NGO and has a semi-governmental structure. It is closely related to the Lebanese government. In the meeting, they discussed the issue they would be bringing up, which Parliament would bring forward as a motion to review. The motion contained a provision instituting a 30% quota for the number of women in Parliament and the political system in general. This would automatically grant seats and positions to women, which was likely to significantly increase women's visibility in politics. The electoral law³⁵ still makes it difficult for women to be put on a party's voting list yet bringing forward among all the lists a political list only for women, which is cross-sectarian. voting list yet bringing forward a political list only for women among all or cross-sectarian lists. Lamia led and advised NCLW's committee. NCLW's sit-in was to take place in front of the Parliament building in downtown Beirut, at the statue of Riad al Solh³⁶. Leaving Lamia's office, I texted a friend, Nadira, who used to invite me to sit-ins related to women's rights matters in the past. Her answer came quickly: "I am in a bit of a hopeless place with local politics at the moment", she wrote, "too frustrated to sit down while fat men keep making decisions for me."

I heard about the sit-in during an interview I had scheduled. Hadya, a university professor and activist, informed me about it the same day. It is unusual for information about sit-ins to be provided at such short notice, as mobilization work needs to happen in advance. Information about an event that is distributed ahead of time is more likely to attract attention since it is also preceded by planning. It may well be that I did not have access to this network. Alternatively, it is also possible that the network preferred to mobilize internally, with most of

³⁵ The new electoral law, passed in June 2017, still links the ability to vote to only the electoral district of her birth origin place and not in the actual place of a person's residence. Voters only can elect candidates standing on lists in their electoral district respectively (Lebanese Republic Ministry of Information 2020: URL) The electoral district listing system grounds in the confessional systems since a list comprises confessions only officially recognized in the electoral district. The Political electoral system is divided into communal districts and sectarian constituencies and dates back to a revised electoral law after the Taif agreement. It has been multiplied revised since then but solely based on power-sharing provisions. See Hudson, Michael (1966).

³⁶ The Riad al Solh Statue in Downtown Beirut (Business district and site, where official public and governmental agencies such as the House of Parliament are located) is a famous place for women's rights activist to gather and express their demands. Riad al Solh was the first prime minister after Lebanon's independence. He was believed to be one of the most relevant politicians in the struggle to unify Lebanon's religious confessions. Through the women's rights activist lens, Riad al Solh symbolizes the vision of a united society women's activists is campaigning for.

the public (or at least those on social media) and other NGOs and groups excluded; even the young activists Nadira and Dina heard about the event just one day in advance.

5.5.1.2 The Sit-In Takes Place

On June 14, 2017, the sit-in was held in front of the Riad al Solh Statute in downtown Beirut. Only a handful of women had attended. Most of them seemed to be older, perhaps middle-aged. I recognized them from pictures posted on the NCLW website, Facebook, and Twitter (both my private account and the organization's). Soldiers came to see if the protest had legal permission to take place. They were smiling, and it was as if they were laughing at the women. The drivers of passing taxis shouted at the women; bystanders stopped, and some approached, curious. The small crowd of activists formed itself to grape's shape. The frontwoman read out her speech and the demands of the sit-in. The speech dealt with political participation and the aim of introducing a women's quota within parliament. There was a scattered media presence, but almost no microphones or cameras. The activists had the upper-middle-class habit of wearing clothing and carrying bags marked with prestigious brands, and their hair and makeup was perfectly styled. The way they navigated the space and moved among themselves, and the soldiers was graceful, strong, and unpredictable; they revealed nothing, neither too friendly nor too aloof. When we had our interview, Lamia had confirmed that she would attend. She had announced earlier that she would be delayed, though, and she was not yet visible. Some women near the spot I stood at worked for the international agency's "Peacebuilding and Human Rights" unit.³⁷

5.5.1.3 The Sit-In Is Evaluated Afterwards

The sit-in was promoted as it occurred and especially afterward, when the activists documented and shared what they'd done via social media—particularly on Twitter, using both private accounts and that of the organization. Compared to other protests I had

³⁷ I then had to attend particular events where international and local political actors meet. NCLW thereby served as the representative of women's activism and feminist politics.

attended, I encountered surprisingly few activists at the sit-in, even though it had been promoted in women's rights activist circles and groups and via word of mouth. Hadya had also emailed and texted friends about the event as I sat in her office. I read the absence of a younger activist audience as evidence of the older generation shaping the campaign's image into a relatively homogeneous one.

5.5.2 // Younger Generations' Women's March 2017//

5.5.2.1 The March Is Planned

Maya is busy. She rushes between events put on by feminist activist and women's rights spaces, moving carefully and professionally from one place to another to network and gather with those involved in feminist activism and women's rights in and around Beirut. If Maya does not raise awareness about the early marriage campaign as part of her duties at the women's NGO RDFL, she then launches her own NGO: *FeMale*. She and her friend Paula, who is an employee of another women's NGO, ABAAD, initially fund their new NGO through crowdfunding. Their self-described feminist agenda tackles gender awareness, body images, and data privacy. Maya states,

[Regarding] the early marriage campaign, in my opinion, I feel that every woman everywhere in Lebanon is part of the target group. RDFL in specific is a grassroots organization since its establishment [in 1976, one year after the civil war started]. Moreover, it differs from all the organizations you are meeting nowadays in Lebanon; I am trying to imitate them in *FeMale*. They believe in membership. *FeMale* is working on a membership basis, which is quite rare because as an NGO, you have to recruit people, and become companies. They do not even have time to work on volunteer activities.

Alongside her daily work schedule, Maya has been mobilizing for the women's march for weeks. This women's march is connected to March 8, the day that UN agencies have declared International Women's Day. On March 8, 1975, the first UN Women's Conference was held in Mexico (UN 1976). The day became a worldwide occasion for drawing attention to women's rights, especially in transnational women's rights activism and feminist networks. The day is also recognized as a holiday in some countries around the world (IWD 2021: URL).

Maya is in her late 20s. The volunteers at Maya's and Paula's NGO, *FeMale*, are mostly teenagers and young women. Their social backgrounds and networks are useful in mobilizing

and reaching out to people who might join this activist gathering. Most of them join feminist or activist clubs in university or school settings. Their outreach helps disseminate knowledge, information, and action into the structures and spaces of daily life. Maya's position is at the margins of several groups within a more extensive network of women's rights activism and feminist networks. It ranges from NGO networks to established women's rights networks to younger, newer emerging activist circles. Popularity and recognition act as hinges that connect and bundle together a variety of groups. Maya is one part of a more extensive activist network that organized and promoted the 2017 women's march.

Besides mobilizing human capital for a protest march, preparation requires notifying the relevant ministries and public transportation authorities, the latter in case of potential road blockages and traffic detours. Consequently, Maya confirmed, the public, the mayor, local politicians, and the security forces (both police and military) are aware of the undertaking. Activists on the ground met to discuss who will be the figurehead and therefore in charge of the march. Dina told me that the activists debated network alliances and selected people to join the committee's steering board. They also addressed how they might connect to a larger sphere of people and how to reach the broader public beyond academic circles, as well as how various media formats could be employed in order to mobilize people and capture the public's attention. On a more practical level, they discussed how they would react if the authorities did not allow the march to take place or canceled it on short notice. Dina and Maya revealed that the organizing committee also discussed sexual harassment during the march and how best to instruct march participants to react; the idea was raised that certain people might be officially identified as the ones to go to if anything happened during the march, and the creation of an awareness and alert team for addressing and documenting incidents was also mentioned. Communicating with and transmitting instructions to the crowd was also discussed.

Questions about logistics and transportation arose as the demonstration would take place in Beirut. The organizing committee discussed how it might involve people coming from outside Beirut who did not possess a car. To that end, they organized buses to pick any such people up before the march and then bring them home safely afterwards. The organizing

committee also reflected on how to best include minorities such as migrant workers³⁸ and refugees in the march while guaranteeing their safety.

5.4.2.2 The March Takes Place

March 11, 2017: The day of the women's march. The march started in the afternoon, after a morning of rain and heavy storms. Given the circumstances, I did not expect a big crowd; I doubted that many people would be willing to go out into the streets and walk around the city for three hours, screaming and whistling the entire time, in the constant rain and wind. However, I wanted to show support and solidarity, as I knew how hard it is to organize such an event. So, I decided to join the march. I went with Greta, who works for an international agency. We arrived a bit late, and from afar we could see the number of people gathered. It was a striking image: young women held signs, written in both English and Arabic, their headscarves and hair either covered by basket caps or umbrellas or soaked through. Their raised voices rang out loud and clear. Led first by Maya, then several volunteers, and finally, at the end, Paula, they were chanting slogans in choirs over and over. Young men also marched, supporting their female colleagues and friends. I also recognized some international

³⁸ The Kafala system is a legally integrated sponsorship system that affects foreign migrant workers. They usually work either in gendered, domestic work areas or construction sites. The legal system allows these workers residency and a work permit, but only under the auspices of a so-called sponsor," who is responsible for them. The sponsor is vested with full authority over the worker and therefore their working conditions as well (KAFA 2020 URL). On International Women's Day in 2018, one of the march's important topics was to guarantee migrant workers safer work and living conditions. Compared to the previous year, the organizing team had reached out to more migrant workers and mobilized them to attend the march. I assume that an ongoing rights-based campaign led by KAFA (on abolishing the sponsorship system) may have been a factor in that.

Formal organizational questions arise around the march, concerning mobilization, lobbying, and the inclusion of and extended mingling between groups and networks. However, technicalities, appearances, and the image to be taken from the march are matters for later discussion. The speakers, the march's central claims, and the equipment and supplies required (e.g., banners, armbands for the organizing team, microphones, pipes for whistling, the group's clothing) are meaningful.

Principal aims were to unify all of the small activist groups, attract mainstream coverage, and reach out. They want to gain a broader audience, not just people from other networks, groups, and associations. Accordingly, the goal is "going big" and "sending a message" in social spheres and the public to interfere and bring in an added view in public discourse. Social media serves as a helpful tool and platform. Several Twitter accounts announced the march's provisional route and any meeting points; this was then retweeted by both private and institutional accounts and also posted on Facebook. Conventional, mainstream media was relied on for disseminating only the bare minimum; a radio station announced the event several times in advance. However, Maya's organization distributed posters and stickers which were hung on (already fully-covered) walls throughout among the city.

journalists and NGO workers. There were older women too, and from what I can recall, some critical figures within local feminist and women's rights circles were also in the crowd.

Nevertheless, the common image was one of young, energetic women fearlessly making themselves visible in the streets. Demonstrators made little videos and took pictures with the cameras on their mobile phones and pictures of the march's actual course. They then tweeted and retweeted these as they continued the march. Security personnel, both soldiers and police officers, followed the march on foot or by car. As the sea of people flowed along their designated route, people watched the spectacle both from the street and the terraces and windows along the way. In some neighborhoods, there was more of an audience; in others, people watched from behind curtains, clandestine. Several spectators filmed and took photographs, some in solidarity, others with antipathy. Men on mopeds followed the crowd for some time, giggling and nodding their heads. Some of them were laughed and yelled at the women marching.

5.5.2.3 March Is Evaluated Afterwards

Post-march evaluation took place in different fora and among various people outside the march organizer's networks.

Although the weather was not on the protestors' side, a considerable number of people still willingly left their houses in order to walk and chant in a crowd for more than three hours. A core group of people made it from start to finish. The police granted the march's route, and the public did not object to letting people march in the streets. Other than smaller incidents, mainly men standing on the side of the street screaming and harassing the women marching, things in general went well and there were no significant disruptions. Dina is a feminist activist working for an international agency. We met over coffee a week after the march. I got to know Dina through a women's rights activist network associated with a university in Beirut. I recognized her from an event that had taken place at one of the private Lebanese universities on International Women's Day a few weeks prior. Dina was an invited speaker at this event, which took place one day before March 8; the women's march took place the weekend after. At this event, young women gave testimonies about sexual harassment in everyday life. A gallery was arranged, featuring images from discriminatory advertisements that sexualized women's bodies in support of men's dominance. There was

also a side exhibition featuring paintings by Middle Eastern female artists. In an interactive workshop, the audience analyzed these images together. The event's wrap-up session staged a roundtable discussion among invited experts, of which Dina was one

When we met over coffee, I referred to the number of participants at the demonstration and asked how she would rate the protest. Dina seemed puzzled. "We are here in the Middle East and not in Europe", she replied. "We did not have that much time in advance to prepare. A collective of younger activists groups initiated and led the action, without our dinosaurs and activists of older generations." Dina made a gesture of refusal. "And by the way, have you attended to any other women's demonstrations here in Lebanon, directed by the older ones? No? Well, if so, then you would have seen the difference and what I meant." During our conversation about the preparations that took place before the march, Dina told me what Maya had said regarding efforts to organize the march's activity.

Dina represented younger feminist activists in Lebanon having difficulty competing against, sympathizing with, and finding themselves in the claims of older, established women's rights and feminist figures. Aims, visions, premises, and concepts of modernity differentiate what Dina follows and believes in. However, she emphasized how fragmented and nuanced the activist scene is, even among younger activists. The march was conducted under a single, unifying claim. The women's march marked a milestone for these activists and had a substantial impact on women's NGOs, feminist and women's rights activism, and public recognition.

5.5.3 // NGO's Sit In //

5.5.3.1 The Sit-In Is Planned

On April 5, 2017, I was able to participate in a PC-organized sit-in led by Lama. The previous day, I passed Lama's office. She sat at her desk, in front of her computer. Tilting her head gently to the right, she pressed the phone against her shoulder while typing something on her keyboard. Making eye contact, she signaled to me to wait until she had finished with her phone call. A few minutes passed, then Lama hung up, simultaneously typing something into her mobile phone. She informed me about the sit-in planned for the following day. She felt lucky that Alaa, an activist member of the campaign, was helping her out with the sit-in's

organization. Alaa was personally affected by the social injustice the campaign dealt with, and he usually came in to volunteer at PCA every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. That day, he made some calls to mobilize activists and organize their participation. He coordinated transportation to the sit-in. A bit later that day, I saw Alaa, under Lama's supervision, writing statements on the banners and placards that activists at the sit-in would hold. At one point, he printed out some pamphlets and informational documents, which needed to be distributed to the public and those present during the sit-in. He also prepared a binder of copies of official documents in it, among them a revised draft for an article of civil law dealing with nationality and citizenship rights; the campaign was demanding reform of the current laws. Lama, by contrast, disappeared for an hour to go to the hairdresser. Afterwards, she informed the official administrative bodies and some conventional media outlets (e.g., television channels, radio stations, and newspapers) about the plan for the sit-in. Approximately an hour before the sit-in took place, some activist members arrived at PCA's offices. Alaa made coffee for the entire office until the taxi took us to the sit-in. Squeezed into the taxi with all the necessary materials and responsible people, we drove through the Beirut traffic.

5.5.3.2 The Sit-In Takes Place

The My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family campaign tackles the legal regulation preventing women from passing on **their** nationality and citizenship on to their children. It targets single mothers and women with a non-Lebanese spouse. Without citizenship, children are denied access to health insurance, education, political participation, civil services, and economic structures. Those rare jobs Lebanon's economy does provide are most often available to Lebanese citizens only. Children of Lebanese mothers without an officially recognized Lebanese father need to have a work permit—the document required to apply for a work permit is similar in format to the one foreigners must fill out in order to work in Lebanon. The official document is costly and needs to be repeatedly renewed. The task of campaigning is an essential part of leading and maintaining a campaign as a whole. The sit-in I observed was just one of the many that had taken place since the campaign's inception in 2003.

This sit-In took place in front of the Ministry for Work, as the sit-in intended to put pressure on that office by making visible the precarious situation of children with Lebanese mothers but no citizenship of their own. The focus was on the work permit. However, digging

more deeply, economic instability and barrier have the intended and unintended consequences of enabling challenges to inheritance and retirement claims, a subject of concern not just for the children themselves. These children cannot study, have to pay more for everything, and are unable to obtain licenses and professional association memberships which require Lebanese citizenship. Studying and living abroad is the only option for many, but them living in the diaspora can have dangerous consequences when their mothers—especially single mothers—remain in Lebanon. Such a situation immediately raises the question of who will take care of the mothers once they retire. As there is little state pension support in Lebanon, political sects take on this responsibility. Citizenship not being automatically granted impacts the social life of those affected in multiple ways.

The Ministry for Work, where the sit-in took place, is situated in a vibrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Beirut. Approximately 15 people took part in the sit-in. Alaa distributed the banners and placards he had prepared, along with PCA-provided "vests" with the campaign's emblem emblazoned on them. In them, the participants looked like a unified, homogenous group—in line with the image of a united collective, although some diversity was visible. The activist group was a mixed one, composed of people who were young, old, with and without children, and alone; while most were women, there were younger men as well. The majority of the campaigners appear to be working- or lower-middle class.

The activists, who had joined Lama and Alaa at PCA's office and with whom I had taken a taxi, inhabit a unique role in the campaign crew. Their membership demonstrates their commitment to and engagement with the issues and PCA as an organization for many years to come, unless the campaign's funding is threatened or put on hold. Being a volunteer indicates a particular form of belonging which has an exclusive but shared value; it offers a safe space and recognition, while at the same time volunteers represent a targeted minority group affected by legal constraints. Through their loyalty and perseverance as activists, volunteers receive their own particular tasks, such those as Alaa performs twice a week. With the exception of Alaa and two other men, the inner circle of activist members is female and roughly reflective of Lebanese society in terms of age, class, and religious affiliation. Inhabiting particular roles enables the campaigning team to delegate work duties and tasks. Such people help to convey knowledge and information about the campaign. They assist in disseminating details about what opportunities exist and what action can be taken to enhance the lives of those who are affected by discrimination and the lack of citizenship. Volunteers act as tutors;

they deliver and transmit information to their communities, spread the word, and raise awareness. They are brokers, and an asset through which the campaign can recruit new members.

Knowledge is acquired and produced through them, and they provide new cases PCA can use, conceptually. Through them, knowledge is acquired and produced, and they provide new cases that PCA can conceptually and evidence-based use for the campaigns. Volunteers are an active force for generating and maintaining a campaign's life by transferring and projecting needs and images. Their experiences and stories contribute to the representation of targeted subjects and transform broad claims about women's matters into articulations of needs and practical insufficiencies. Volunteers are also a work relief for PCA's campaign and its executive force. They are indispensable, and campaign leaders invest a colossal amount of trust in them by assigning them responsibilities and work. Not just their personal, autobiographical connection to the campaign but also their bodies and physical presence are documented and transformed into the campaign's overall demands, rendering them visible.

The ministry is located directly beside a driveway leading to the street. One can imagine how busy the place was with traffic. Thanks to their banners and PCA vests, the group of demonstrators contrasts sharply with the ten armed soldiers standing in front of the Ministry of Work. Loud music blasted from speakers mounted on the roof of a minibus. The lyrics of the music, which was chosen by either Lama or Alaa, dealt with rights and motherhood, revolution and resistance. At the beginning of the sit-in, it remained invisible to outsiders, who would not deign to look at the small crowd. The activists were relatively quiet, not chanting or screaming but allowing the placards they held in the air to convey their message. The entire sit-in lasted around two hours. I saw women and children holding their placards up the entire time. Gradually, drivers and passerby grew curious and began to pay attention to the sit-in. Lama and a few volunteers scurried around, organizing and making sure everything was working as planned. The climax of the performance would be her speech; while she initially spoke to just a single reporter, more would suddenly arrive before long.

The soldiers watched the performance quietly but attentively. They let the demonstrators do as they liked. Lama greeted a popular, well-known activist, who embodies women's rights activism because she has been promoting women's matters since Lebanon's independence. I had seen her at various women's rights events and gatherings before, either as an invited speaker or a special guest. She could usually be seen discussing the campaign's

demands with Members of Parliament, politicians, high-level donors, diplomats, or foreign officials. She would give statements or simply stand next to a campaign's representative, usually Lama or, in specific international or transnational spheres, Mina. A military officer approached Ina, a volunteer who was both acting as Lama's spokeswoman and responsible for the press. It seemed as if they agreed upon something, and she handed him the binder that contained the draft. He then disappeared behind the ministry's doors. The number of bystanders grew, and within minutes, so had the number of reporters, their microphones and cameras in tow. Up until that moment, some activists had been interviewed by single reporters, no more. But suddenly, it was packed. Suddenly, Lama took the stage her voice booming through the loudspeakers. On her right was the older activist; on the left, she was flanked by the inner circle of volunteers. Placards and banners behind them completed the picture. Many mobile phones were airing the event, and Ina was continually tweeting and taking pictures throughout. To me, Lama's speech sounded strong, self-confident. She made her claims clear by consciously emphasizing certain words. After her speech, the officer who had spoken with Ina appeared again. Along with Ina and the older activist, Lama left the scene, entering the building escorted by the officer and some soldiers. As suddenly, it ended as it had begun. The media quickly vanished. After the sit-in had ended, everything went fast. People took off their vests, throwing them on the ground along with the placards they had held in the air. The campaign's activist group, previously united, consistent, and dense, redistributed itself. As if elements of reliable aggregation transform into gaseous conglomeration or dissipate. All go their ways again.

5.5.3.3 The Sit-In is Evaluated Afterwards

After the return to PCA's offices, both the campaign and PCA websites were updated with posts about the sit-in. Pictures were organized (to make it easier to select the best of them later on) and then uploaded. The PCA blog reported the event. A published newspaper article was shared and linked to on the website. The project's leader also listed the sit-in's expenses. I believe this was done so that financial donors could audit them and then put the sit-in on the list of successful projects. Compared to the women's march, which was well-organized but left space for diversity, spontaneity, and single protesters' own initiative, PCA's sit-in was more professionally executed, and processed. The women's march aimed to be less vertically

structured and administered and more guided by solidarity and experience instead. The recording serves both its own purpose and as the kind of project outcome that financial donors require for audit purposes.

The documentation of sit-ins mentioned above operates mostly as evidence which will enable other activities to occur, either in the future or during the current project's proposed timeframe. Moreover, the act of documenting functions as a tool for evaluating whether or not a march was successful. While protest activities vary, they are often follow-ons which build on the achievements and claims of previous actions. I see sit-ins in this setting as possessing the characteristics of being assembled and do not contain single performances. Giving a speech helps present demands, and the media present report on and take pictures of it. The team of the organization that launches a protest covers it through photographs, which are then immediately disseminated (usually on social media). Edited and more refined details and pictures are then shared later on. The aim is unity in the metaphorical and also figurative sense.

Public sit-ins create a visibility that is intended to be linked to. This requires the documentation of the activities. Sit-ins establish themselves as parameters against which future events can be measured and evaluated. I argue that sit-ins have something processual that can be associated with an organic coming-together: a constant state of motion, a bringing together and a growing together, but also separation.

In this chapter, I have attempted to document women's rights activism in Lebanon and have examined three specific cases of activism on the ground. In doing so, I have found that sometimes the role of activism is to represent itself. This occurs, as I have shown, both in the context for the activists themselves as a platform of representation, and in the context of donor-donee relationship, where through activism representation the demands of donors are met and held.

Further, I have shown in this chapter that women's activism is a heterogeneous movement and is composed of many different groups and subgroups. I argue that this activism forms a symbiotic version of knowledge production, institutional organization, and (re)presentation. These activisms are documented in three ways: (1) through difference and diversity; (2) by the increasing internationalization of law, transnational networks, and (3) through Lebanese politics.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated that women's rights activism in Lebanon is characterized by its heterogeneity, dynamic processes, and layered representations. The various protests and actions analyzed reveal how activism is not only a means of advocating for rights but also a crucial site of negotiation—between generations, organizational structures, and legal frameworks. The documentation methods employed serve both to consolidate these actions and to project them into national and international arenas, reinforcing their symbolic and political significance. Ultimately, I argue that understanding these multifaceted processes offers vital insights into how grassroots activism is embedded within and responds to broader sociopolitical and legal transformations in Lebanon, shaping both the past and future trajectories of women's rights in the country.

Based on this understanding, it is crucial to examine how everyday practices, social interactions and negotiation processes at a micro level — such as meetings and organizational routines — contribute to the layered representations of women's rights activism in Lebanon. These practices lay the groundwork for the diversity and dynamism evident in protests, campaigns, and advocacy work. As the previous chapter illustrated, these activities are not merely routine; they are crucial sites of negotiation between different generations, organizational structures and legal frameworks that shape the symbolic and political impact of activism. The documentation methods discussed reinforce this process by capturing and projecting these actions onto national and international stages, where they gain further symbolic and political significance.

6. Staging the Meeting as a Social Performance by Donors and NGOs

While protests and public actions exemplify the visible face of women's rights activism in Lebanon, these moments are only one aspect of a complex process. The actual shaping and implementation of change often occur behind closed doors—in meetings, organizational routines, and negotiation spaces. These settings serve as stages where the symbolic messages conveyed on the streets are translated into concrete strategies and decisions. Such arenas are places of negotiation, where diverse interests, power dynamics, and unwritten norms come into play. In this way, they connect the public, performative expressions of activism with the more micro-level processes that ultimately influence legal and societal change.

6.1 Introduction

Some may view everyday practices as too ordinary or routine to warrant detailed examination. I reject this perspective. These routines are rooted in how individuals behave and adhere to norms or rules in specific situations. Professional relationships develop through meetings, which act as stages where people perform and act.

I draw on specific categories established by Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, such as "backstage behavior" and "front stage", using these as spatial metaphors for women's rights negotiations and decision-making processes. According to Goffman, settings extend beyond formal, visible, and recognizable spaces (2017: 18). I employ these categories to illustrate how negotiations and decision-making around women's rights unfold in different contexts. However, the actors operating on Goffman's "front stage" (2017: 19–30) are less intriguing than those in the wings, and those working behind the scenes are even more compelling. The social environment is structured by specific codes (2017: 6–8), while the physical location influences social norms and interactions.

In the following chapter, I argue that acts of performance—deliberate displays—generate and project unequal relationships within social settings where donor-driven, project-related decisions take place. Donors and donees are the primary actors in these interactions. I further examine the effects of these meetings, including the decisions made and their implications for the material, transient, and bureaucratic horizons of NGOs' project maintenance. Projects focused on women's empowerment and the strengthening of women's

rights fundamentally depend on funding—that is, financial support—underscoring the crucial role of resource mobilization.

The depicted meeting illustrates how negotiations over funding resemble a staged play—rehearsed yet largely improvisational. Questions about money serve as a means to negotiate which measures are suitable for advancing women's rights, with the performance often manifesting as mimicry and resistance in the negotiation process between donors and NGOs over shared project ideas. I will demonstrate this with empirical data.

Within NGOs working on women's rights and empowerment—actors embedded in a global, transnational network—the entire format of meetings is dynamic, with shifting power relations, alliances, structures, and materials. I collected fieldwork data by observing participants during numerous workshops, meetings, and conferences of various scale. Across these settings, procedures appeared largely uniform, with most actors clearly aware of their roles and procedural rituals, often internalized in advance.

I am particularly interested in how documents—materialized in lists or generic terms such as "beautification"—influence the shape and scope of projects NGOs facilitate and the funds donors provide. I employ the terms donor and donee to clarify each party's position and roles.

As demonstrated in this chapter, asymmetrical dependence is subtly embedded in the exchange of ideas. While donor institutions rely on NGOs to generate ideas they can present to other international donors or highlight domestically, NGOs often adopt or even have ideas imposed on them by donors. However, the relationship is not solely dictated by the donors; NGOs possess strategic maneuvering space, recognizing that donors heavily depend on their expertise and implementation capacity.

Money generally flows in one direction—from donors to NGOs—highlighting an inherent asymmetry. Nevertheless, this imbalance is mitigated by the fact that donors are highly dependent on NGOs for project success; failure to perform accordingly risks the withdrawal of future funding. This creates a "stage" during meetings—where asymmetries both shape and influence organizational structures—yet also allows room for maneuver. NGOs can leverage this, knowing that donors rely on their expertise as essential partners.

This chapter contributes to the overarching research question of how women's rights organizations work toward legal transformation. It highlights that financial resources are fundamental for enabling and sustaining this process. Fundraising, as a key component, is not

merely about securing funds; it embodies strategic negotiations, resource allocation, and institutional capacity-building. The chapter illustrates how the mobilization and management of resources directly affect the scope, scale, and efficacy of legal reforms. Moreover, it shows that financial flows are deeply intertwined with power relations—privileging certain agendas over others and shaping the priorities of women's NGOs. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of fundraising provides crucial insights into the mechanisms through which women's rights organizations influence law and policy, as well as how they maintain their operational independence and political agency in the pursuit of legal transformation. Before advancing further into the theoretical framework of staging and the relevance of stages in meetings, as well as their connection to ethnographic data, I will briefly introduce anthropological concepts regarding stages, meeting interactions and performances.

The scenic anthropology approach (Destrooper 2018) provides an analytical perspective for examining power relations and the logic of dependency within social settings. In particular, the context of a meeting—coupled with what can be characterized as a relationship of postcolonial paternalism between donor and donee—gives rise to specific dynamics. The representations of these meetings—what I refer to as "the play"—capture the concerns that emerge in routine, everyday performances of donor–donee interactions. While such performances often occur in micro settings, staging them reveals these dynamics as part of broader social and institutional frameworks. The environment in which the meeting takes place is crucial to knowledge production: these encounters typically occur within bureaucratic, structured, and institutionalized spaces. The social context of these settings influences agendas, topics, interests, framing, and negotiations, as well as the nature of the organization hosting the meeting.

Helen Schwartzman's (1989) analysis of meetings emphasizes key components such as relational constellations, behaviors, habitus, and language use among participants. Similarly, Hannah Brown, Adam Reed, and Tomas Yarrow (2017) examine the ethnography of meetings in a co-edited volume, illustrating how micro-social arrangements and the (re-)performance of panels are intentionally constructed with an awareness of broader social contexts and external audiences. Schwartzman's focus is on the actors and their habitus, whereas Brown and colleagues explore the outside audience—the absent element. In my analysis, I emphasize the expectations and demands placed upon the meeting itself, along with the visions and

scripts that underlie it. As a result, the various performances within and around the meeting become crucial in exposing hidden tensions and unspoken objectives.

Marilyn Strathern (2018) further explores the performative dimension of ethnography, especially the infrastructures that underpin ethnographic analysis and fieldwork. She considers how tools and limitations inherent to ethnography influence what can be observed and understood.

My contribution to this discussion is the observation that meetings are imbued with expectations, hopes, promises, and pre-existing standards—elements that can be analyzed as staged performances. Erving Goffman's (2017) framework offers a valuable approach for understanding this complexity. The meeting functions as a localized performance in which the concept of the boundary object—a notion originally introduced by Star (2010)—takes on new form and significance. Expectations, unspoken wishes, desires, and claims can be understood as "hidden agendas" circulating within the space, often expressed indirectly through official statements or language. These unspoken elements are negotiated behind the scenes, influencing the direction and outcomes of the discussions and, ultimately, the project itself.

In this chapter, I undertake three main tasks: Firstly, I introduce the theoretical framework—Erving Goffman's (2017) staging concept—as the basis for analyzing my ethnographic data, emphasizing its focus on everyday practices and social routines. Secondly, I describe the meeting as a stage divided into "front stage" and "backstage", illustrating how roles are ascribed during project negotiations and how these roles shape the emerging partnership between funder and NGO.

Finally, I focus on the budget and the category of "beautification"—which I suggest function as boundary objects (Star, 2010)—to reveal how flexible, shared structures intersect dynamically during the meeting. These boundary objects illustrate how project funding ideas are shared and negotiated, often according to different intentions and unspoken objectives, which I term "hidden agendas".

6.2 Theoretical Framing

American sociologist Harold Garfinkel is the "founding father" of ethnomethodology. Garfinkel's ethnomethodological approach has positively influenced the analysis of interaction and practices; for example, in the analysis of legal practices (2002 [1967]). Garfinkel carried

out extensive research on daily routines and everyday life experiences. In particular, he explored the functions of social structure and order and how order is redistributed and navigated through regular habits and behavior. Trained as a sociologist, Garfinkel argues that sociological studies often leave out particularities of legal practitioners' individual practices. The practical blind spots in these practices have value, according to Garfinkel, as indicators suitable for analyzing interactions. Garfinkel uses the expression "missing what" (1967) to reveal a research gap. This gap exists with regard to legal regulation procedures in legal practitioners' everyday practices and work setting.

I thereby follow British sociologist and practice theorist Anthony Giddens (1984), who considers structures a social practice and, therefore, talks about structuring practices. Giddens believes that these structures are practiced and lived through social structures and the solidification of structures according to his view of structuring practices. This means that through the process of structuring, a structure's social practice breathes new life into it, which has real effects on the social setting or environment.

While I was doing fieldwork in Lebanon, I repeatedly posed the questions "What is everyone doing?" and "How do they deal with what they are doing?" while attending meetings in institutional settings. The point of view behind these questions indicates that structures constrain the actors who live within them and experience them socially. In such a playing space, characters act and interact. Moreover, structures lead to reciprocal relations. Relations arise through the power of performance. The power of a performance, in turn, influences the way that performance is negotiated and interpreted.

According to my observations, institutional frameworks—those of NGOs, for instance—are a constructed but given structure with different stages on which actors play their roles in relation to each other and bureaucratic material (especially documents). Gestures, habits, greetings, words, jargon, language, manners, and dress codes play are those that the stage allows to be there. The stage has boundaries and limitations; it includes and excludes. On the other hand, I argue that there are also some fields and techniques that a single actor can employ in order to interact in unforeseeable ways. Although the intentions expected of each role are predictable, there may still be some unforeseen plot-related ruptures, I contend, which can change the game or lead it into another direction.

What I think is missing in Goffman's analysis is more of an emphasis on the mutually reinforcing processualization of content and form. For example, I argue that documents in

various forms travel among different stages, and not only their shape but also their content is transformed (Scheffer 2006; 2007). Such microanalysis highlights socio-logics and specialties of infrastructure, linguistic statements, and material objects. The peculiarities seek to understand broader relational connectedness and concepts such as the partnership between donor and donee and power structures in more general governance and altruism field, led by moral and normative rhetoric. The meeting manifests donors and NGO workers' opposing positions with regard to women's empowerment and body politics, which they aim to reconcile through negotiations and business interests.

Goffman (2017 [1959]) chose to connect his social analysis of everyday life to one of theatrical performance. He paid attention to roles and the rules and norms of scripts, actors' performances, and sets. Using performance, the importance of representation becomes obvious. One follows the rules dictated by the playing of a certain role, and this affects what one takes from a given situation, what one takes from a specific situation. The stage serves as the place of representation and thus also shapes the actors' roles (2017: 18). Based on Goffman's insights, I argue that different actors play multiple roles at different stages of everyday life (2017: 18). This poses the question: are the parts given to them, and how can they actively shape, change, transform, or design the play and their role? What kind of rules, norms, and codes exist behind this, and where do they come from? It is clear that they follow specific hierarchical structures and rules regarding power relations, but how are they connected within the setting, the relationship between the actors, and, possibly, external structures which are "imposed" but regarded as "given"? As I see it, a stage can also exist on different levels; actors can switch between them behind the scenes, as well as between the conventions that go with different roles, they can incorporate. The stage determines the actors' blocking. The stage dictates how the actors act and, more importantly, who must act (Goffman 2017, 17-18).

One characteristic that the stage as a setting entails is the opportunity for acting, even though that acting is structured and predefined. Although Goffman's stage is a physical place, I do not consider physicality the only condition a scene requires. Context and the specific circumstances of a given a stage influence the roles and the interactions between them in the play. Preset structures limit the scope. My critique of Goffman is that that he remains stuck on the stage setting as situational, even physical, and he does not address structurality. I am attempting to show that through performance, boundary objects, and hidden agendas,

asymmetrical disguises are situationally produced—or else attempts are made to remove these disguises. Nevertheless, the meeting as an example shows one thing: even if I argue that project implementation is more focused on a global level than a local one, the ethnography makes it clear that the local perspective is all the more important and needed to make project work possible.

Therefore, situational partnerships are relevant, relevant and impactful on a local level as well as a global one. I even argue that it is less about the content itself than the structuring practices the play is composed of. Furthermore, power differentials relationships are made visible through the staging process, and the fact that the performance stages a meeting between a donor and an NGO. I demonstrate this with the play based on ethnographic data that follows.

More recent work such as that of German sociologist Thomas Scheffer (2007) analyzes daily life practices in terms of routinized activities, describing them through ideas of event and process. He states, "An event would not be called an event if there was no rupture, turning point, or emergence attached to it. The event deserves appreciation because it stands for an entire culture of everyday life" (Scheffer 2007: 190). Scheffer also considers process and event to be the most significant components in social formations. He insists on debunking the dualism of those two social units, emphasizing the connectivity between event and process as a procedure.

Goffman's theatre metaphor helps to make the meeting more understandable, something that he analyzes in a small way through his stage categories. This helps one both understand the complexity of the relationships and roles within in a meeting and represent that complexity in a more simplified way. Scheffer's perspective allows us to understand the meeting as an event in process and also look outside of it: What preceded the meeting, and what is made relevant in the meeting? What does the meeting prepare to be the next step in the process? Garfinkel, a pioneer in analyzing situational logics of action, noted that there is a gap in research, especially in the context of legal practices, when actors practice and structure logics of action that concern law and normativity.

To bring these dynamics to life, I draw on Goffman's theatrical metaphor, viewing meetings as performances where actors play roles within structured rules. This demonstrates how the concepts presented in theory work in practice. The following example describes a real meeting in which performativity, roles and strategies become visible.

6.3 The Play

// One day in July 2016 //

The Scene

Our setting is the periphery of downtown Beirut, also known as Beirut's business district. The neighborhood is known as a place for commerce and trade; a work hub open to everyone, regardless of class. During the civil war, the souks developed into a no-person's land where fighters from different groups clashed. The business district lay in ruins after the civil war but has since been modernized into an area oriented towards the upper classes. The post-civil war reconstruction was interrupted in 2006. Israeli army bombing destroyed prestigious buildings and the highway that connects downtown Beirut to surrounding neighborhoods such as Hamra and Monot.

The Donor:

Marcel: The European head of the Peacebuilding and Human Rights unit. He has expertise in the Middle East region, which he gained through university studies, language training, and work experience. Marcel can choose his partners and decide who he would like to collaborate with in the near future. The projects Marcel's unit supports need to fulfil the unit's conceptual guidelines. These guidelines are based on foreign policy interests and agreements and international treaties. The unit's title Peacebuilding and Human Rights summarizes these guiding principles and ideas.

Marcel's unit selects thematic priorities to be implemented operationally and adapted to local and regional circumstances and demands. Marcel wants to improve the unit's plan for promoting women's rights and empowerment. He has worked in management positions with high skills requirements. He has worked at the agency's headquarters in the West and been based in local offices. Despite his extensive work experience in the region, he is not particularly well-versed in local conditions, especially with regard to NGO settings, dominant discourses on gender, law transformation, leading women's NGOs, and ongoing political and grassroots activism in Lebanon.

Being head of the unit means being in charge of the management team, including their duties and responsibilities in their respective local settings. This means that the head of the unit is the authority that supervises every step of a project, from finding, considering, and adapting to it to finally supporting it. Marcel delegates the work, meaning that his colleague, who is a native Arab speaker and more familiar with the local context, executes the evaluation procedures, deals with organizational and administrative matters, and writes reports.

Zara: Zara is Lebanese-Australian. She grew up outside Lebanon and lived there for most of her life, and she was educated in the West. Before joining Marcel's unit, she worked for several international organizations, mainly ones with headquarters in Beirut. She works as a broker within the organization, which has both European and Lebanese staff. Zara is often seen as being local, due to her Lebanese origins and her experience working for international institutions in Lebanon. The organization needs her local knowledge, which it uses in realizing its projects. Zara is also the one who puts future partners in contact with the institution. She is in charge of public relations, organizes events and workshops around the unit's curriculum and partners, and does assistant work as well as handling the communication between Marcel and the NGO's directors. Her division values Zara's work in Lebanon and is dependent on her local knowledge and wisdom. The combination of personnel above suggests two things. First, only Zara has familial, cultural, or religious ties to the country in which the unit's staff works. Second, Zara has professional experience in the NGO domain in Beirut but specific expertise in international agencies. Between these two characteristics, the unit considers Zara both the local and domestic expert and the international organization's poster child.

Sirin: A researcher doing fieldwork. Sirin has been working as an assistant to both Marcel and Zara for one month, supporting the unit in identifying and mapping potential gender-focused women's rights projects in Lebanon. As an employee, she largely takes on the perspective and positionality of Marcel's unit.

The NGO (The Donee)

Ahmed: Ahmed is the director and founder of the NGO Research Institute for Peace and Empowerment (RIPE), which was founded in the early 2000s. RIPE focuses on social justice, human rights, and peace and reconciliation. It mainly supports projects in the north of Lebanon, especially around Tripoli, the country's second-biggest city. Ahmed and Marcel's

units have been working together for several months. The organization's projects foster action-oriented and participative approaches to involving their target groups in decision-making and procedures. Like many adults with a Lebanese background, Ahmed spent some time outside Lebanon during the war, studying and working abroad.

Setting Information / The Meeting

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss ideas for a project Ahmed intended to launch. For the launch, Ahmed needed financial support. Marcel was considered a potential supporter of the project, either in the short term or for its entire lifespan. Even if Marcel's department did not finance Ahmed's project, it was possible that the meeting could serve as a starting point for the donor and the NGO to conceive of and launch a new project.

Marcel's unit had already partnered with Ahmed's NGO and had supported some of its projects as well. The two organizations had established a professional relationship, holding several meetings at both Ahmed's and Marcel's facilities. Shifting priorities were always a reason for cancelling and rescheduling meetings. Those decisions were often driven by internal institutional logic, traffic, or delays and the knock-on effects of by previous appointments running over.

On the other hand, Ahmed made a huge effort to be at Marcel's unit's disposal, even adjusting his own availability to match Marcel's.

Appointments were often postponed or cancelled on short notice, no matter whether they were to discuss looking for an institution to support or a partner with whom to collaborate and get assistance from. Neither party felt guilty about canceling or postponing prearranged appointments. With regard to last-minute changes to organizations' plans and appointments, traffic in Lebanon has special relevance. The space of the city and its infrastructure operate as an "actant" (Latour 1987). During rush hour and prime commuting times, cars clog the streets, blocking them. The roads are obsolete, not made for the number of vehicles that exist today in Lebanon. Though this is common knowledge, travel times are still unpredictable, making them impossible to calculate. Appointments, therefore, may fall through even when a time buffer is built in.

// Act 1: Ahmed's Arrival

Ahmed arrived at the large building that Marcel and Zara's organization was located in by taxi. The organization's offices were on the seventh floor. The building stood at the corner of an intersection on a broad main road. Several soldiers patrolled in front of the building. A security guard awaited Ahmed at the door. Ahmed had to give his name and that of his organization and say who he planned to meet. The guard then called the organization's receptionist, who, in turn, called Zara to inform that her Marcel's appointment had arrived. As soon as she—or Marcel—had confirmed his meeting with Ahmed, the receptionist gave the security guard permission to send Ahmed up. Stepping out of the elevator on the seventh floor, Ahmed was met by another soldier. This one asked him the same questions as the security guard downstairs. Ahmed needed to again state the purpose of his visit and the name of the person he was to meet. This standard procedure was one that everyone who did not work in the building but who regularly worked with the international organization had to go through.³⁹

Meanwhile, the receptionist approached the inside of the double door. She signaled Ahmed to come through the first door. He then needed to wait for it to close behind him before the receptionist pressed the button and opened the second door, finally allowing him to enter the agency's offices. During the entry procedure, Zara came down the hall to meet Ahmed. I waited a bit further down the hallway until Zara asked me to join them. Zara introduced me to Ahmed and I greeted him. A little while later, Marcel followed.

Once the physical and organizational framework has been established through the scene description, the next step is to examine how the actors stage their roles and the strategies they pursue.

Act 2: Greeting and Meeting

Zara, who was hosting the meeting, offered Ahmed something to drink and then introduced herself, explaining her role within the organization to him. As she did so, she referred to work settings and geographical locations that were familiar to both of them, as

³⁹ Security checks are a commonplace sight in public, on private property, and within institutions. They are not rare. However, this particular security procedure was unique, even for Lebanese people who had grown up with such things. One day, some activists I had invited to the institution expressed their astonishment ironically, saying, "Our daily life is already a hassle, why add more?" From a European perspective, the security checks were comparable with those at American embassies in foreign countries.

well as mutual colleagues and even relatives. The latter were easily identified, if not by the region their family was from then by their surnames. The whole greeting ritual took place in the hallway. We then entered the conference room. Marcel waited until Zara and I took a seat. He seemed surprised that neither of us wanted to sit facing the large seventh-floor window, which allowed for a stunning view of the port, the Beirut skyline, and even the snake serpent relief north to Jbeil. In stark contrast to the temperature outside, the room was air-conditioned. When Marcel left the conference room, Zara and Ahmed checked their smartphones, both of which would sound several times during the meeting that followed. In front of me lay the project proposal that Ahmed's colleague had written. I browsed a little through its four pages.

When Marcel rejoined us, we returned to attention and waited for his next move. He once again made small talk with Ahmed, joking around for quite a long time about things like the weather, food, traffic and the differences in people's mentalities. Then, swiftly and skillfully, he switched to business—namely, the project outlined in the proposal.

As long as Marcel was not in the room, nothing significant happened. Despite Zara's importance to the meeting and the project-related work, she remained invisible and in the background. She became visible, it seemed, only when Marcel needs her help, assigns her work, or leaves things undone that she must then finish.

Act 3: Project Description

RIPE's plan is to improve conditions for people in Lebanon in the areas of environment, economy, knowledge production, community participation, and peacebuilding. The organization considers itself a research center, one where data and information related to the fields above are collected and disseminated (in the form of fact sheets, reports, statistics, and papers) via social media and other platforms. As a project outcome, RIPE created a center in Tripoli for women to use as a meeting space, for gatherings, and to work. By work, I mean activities related to the purposes for which the center was created: reconciliation and peacebuilding work. In practice, this work entails women discussing politics, their needs, and how their daily lives affect them. They need to organize among themselves and develop strategies for claiming their needs on a communal level. The project presented here suited Marcel's unit's agenda, as it dealt with human rights issues and conflict resolution.

The micro-local universe that the project concentrated on is in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, in a neighborhood comprised of two areas separated by a street. The street separates the area's established religious groups, Sunni and Shia, which are hostile to one another due to violent conflicts in the past. The differing political loyalties that caused these conflicts may also be a reason for these groups to separate from each other.

Having finished the formal greeting rituals, Marcel began leading the conversation in a serious, "project-oriented" direction. He asked Ahmed to introduce us to an ongoing project, one which Marcel's unit had already supported. Marcel told Ahmed to explain how things stood with the project's challenges and outcomes. Ahmed needed to elaborate on some innovative ideas he planned to implement in the new project (the one under discussion) since the current one was to end soon.

At first, Ahmed wanted to speak French, but Marcel gently interrupted him, indicating that Zara did not know that language. Marcel may have wanted to include Zara in the conversation because he intended to delegate follow-up for the meeting to her. I got the impression that Ahmed mainly repeated what was written in his project proposal, but with different technical jargon. In his introduction, he referred mainly to a "cost-benefit" model and measurable results. Marcel and Zara listened attentively without any major interruptions. Judging from Marcel's expression, which remained unimpressed, Ahmed's presentation was not very convincing.

During his introduction of the project, Ahmed mentioned women's appearances several times or insisted on discussing women's appearances and that the project intended to protect and empower women. At this point, it is necessary to note the structural nature of NGO projects. NGO projects often created from the ground up. Instead, they are derived from previous projects. There is only one exceptional case in which projects can start from scratch: if an NGO employee founds a new NGO. The NGO employee is already familiar with the funding landscape and ongoing discourses and projects in the NGO network and domain of operations. Contacts and connections to possible sponsors in the area already exist, and the objectives are precise and clear. A single project will not cover all an NGO's expenses, infrastructure costs, and employee salaries, so most usually have several projects underway. A project's concept and implementation should ideally require a life span of several months and be subject to renewal. However, NGOs' financial situation is precarious and, in many cases, not sustainable. NGOs with a specific focus commonly manage several projects under

the same umbrella category—for example, topics such as women's rights or empowerment. Projects are broken down into a variety of initiatives or activities. In light of these conditions, the overall intent of Ahmed's project intent was to protect and empower women. The following act analyzes Ahmed's suggested assignment. One aspect what One aspect of the intention of Ahmed's project that must be mentioned is the focus on women's appearances is the women's beauty and appearances.

Act 4: The Obstacle: "Beautification"

Without exception, every project proposal document includes, on the very last page, an Excel table with a provisional budget covering the project's entire life span. As mentioned above, these projects do not endure in the long run. All expenses are carefully listed, ordered, and categorized according to predefined NGO rubrics related to the needs the project addresses. Judging from Marcel's reaction (and my knowledge of his requirements) the budget—that is, the items listed on each row and the amount of money in each column—seemed to pass muster. However, one of the categories listed was unusual and it immediately caught my attention: "beautification". Marcel noticed it too and asked Ahmed what it meant. Ahmed told him that instead of posters of martyrs, there should be pictures of beautiful women on the walls. He was referring to the "encounter center", which had been established with funding from a project in the contested neighborhood in Tripoli. There, women gathered, communicated, and eventually formed a political agenda for participation on a communal level, thus contributing to the women's political participation and fulfilling the requirements of the project's generic goal of empowerment." By saying that martyr posters needed to be replaced, Ahmed meant that historical narratives should feature not only martyrs who have been remembered for their wartime service, but also women who have become successful and esteemed within society through their glorious deeds. He also meant that pictures of women should replace the old, yellowed pictures of martyrs lining the streets, which time and weather had caused to peel.

I sensed a mix of astonishment and discomfort in the donor's reaction to Ahmed's explanation. Personally, I was amazed that he truly believed that a project replacing the images of fallen soldiers and fighters with images of women who were "beautiful", successful, or famous (or some combination thereof) would be acceptable to an NGO that wanted to

promote gender equality and had devoted a great deal of effort to countering women's invisibility as well as their objectification. In addition to RIPE's vision of women's empowerment, I was also astonished that Ahmed made this proposal to a funder in a competitive work environment where there is increasing competition for fundraising and where a culture of gender sensitivity, awareness, and interest in women's empowerment is beginning to flourish.

The chilly reception his idea received seemed to make Ahmed feel the need to further explain what he meant by "beautification". He attempted to illustrate how "beautification" would be realized through the project's activities, combining the idea of "beautification" with actions that women might undertake within the project's framework. Ahmed explained that the street dividing the two areas within that specific neighborhood needed to be cleaned and "beautified". He suggested that women, who were already attending the center regularly, should sweep, repaint, decorate, and plant trees or plants along the street in order to improve its sad state. Through these physical activities, the women would have the opportunity to meet, encountering each other against the backdrop of the hostile borders that society had established between families, relatives, and neighbors. Beyond the possibility of establishing friendships and achieving reconciliation, the women would alliances, which would be of use in political work and communal politics. As a result of the project, women could solidarize and participate more actively in politics. According to Ahmed, a significant amount of the "beautification" money would be spent on the tools necessary for cleaning and beautifying the streets. They would need to buy plants, trees, seeds, and cleaning equipment, such as brooms, scissors, and shovels.

After Ahmed's explanation of the rubric of "beautification", we discussed other topics related to the budget and the project's aims and objectives. The other categories listed were not addressed in the same depth that "beautification" had been. The rest of the meeting went smoothly, and the atmosphere was a comfortable one. Ahmed, Marcel, and Zara offered suggestions for further potential project activities. They discussed potential collaborations with other partners or NGOs working in the same field or on the same objective. Marcel and Zara demanded some changes on behalf of the donors, but mostly they asked for clarifications. The entire meeting lasted about an hour. At the end of it, Marcel promised to get back to Ahmed regarding the project and further amendments to its design. I took from

this that a tacit agreement had been made to support the project and further collaborations, including fine-tuning the project's design.

Act 5: The Finale (The Decision)

After we saw Ahmed off, Marcel, Zara, and I remained in the meeting room, collecting our materials and tidying up the space so it would be ready for another meeting scheduled afterwards. When we were about to leave the meeting room, Marcel said to Zara that the long-discussed category of "beautification" needed to be eliminated from the budget. There was no negotiation or discussion about rephrasing or reframing. Marcel did not explain his decision, but he did say that his unit's donors would not want to spend their money on such an initiative. Therefore, it would be impossible for him to justify it in front of the decision-making committee. Zara nodded and wrote down what he had said. We left the meeting room one by one.

Thus ended the performance of the meeting. All actors exited the stage. //

This scene is more than just a meeting; it is a performative stage on which roles, norms, and strategies are negotiated. In the following section, I analyze how these performative processes reveal the structures and power relations.

6.4 The Front Stage

In this section, I use terms from my theoretical framing to show how roles become fixed through a meeting's situational context. I further show how the front stage, with its roles, creates logics of action and processes and partnership constellations.

As in its theatrical equivalent, an ensemble in this context is supposed to be an inwardly turned, inclusive group. Actors perform their roles on a stage (Goffman 2017: 70). Therefore, they strengthen their performance of the scene. They form a group, a social organization. Such an (un-)conscious identification feature does not depend on a person's characteristics, but rather on her function and position within the group. A group is formed and organized under specific conditions. The members are aware of each other and know vital

information about their environment (e.g., language, rule systems, norms, and script) (Goffman 2017: 66-67).

To begin with, what everyone has in common are materialized documents and greeting rituals. The greeting patterns follow precedent even if nobody is moving and staying all in one place, and everyone pretends not to know the rules governing small talk. Marcel can question Ahmed critically about how he spends his money, but this isn't possible the other way around. Both have to justify their agendas to one another, but Ahmed much more so and differently than Marcel. This also reveals, situationally, the structural asymmetries at play. Also, neither Zara nor I could lead the meeting; at best, we might join in the conversation and perhaps ask a question.

I summarize this shared and (re-)produced knowledge as a culture of the stage. This kind of culture contains a common language, norms (which are also codified in documents), and ethics. That means that they are familiar with the same methods of verbal (i.e., language) and non-verbal (e.g., gestures, facial expression, body language) communication.

I argue that the distribution of roles to actors can serve to question the dualistic pair of truth and fiction and invoke open questions and different functions.

According to Goffman (2017: 6-10), there are different techniques during interactions that actively influence actions, e.g., modulation, register changes, maneuvers, mystification, truth/fiction, representation, role, "(im-)material status symbolism" Bourdieu (1979), and facades.

It seems that all actors have secrets, which they try to blur or even hide from other ensemble members. They are maintained, noticed, and treated as open secrets (Goffman 2017: 129-133). Following this thought, I believe that open secrets can be interpreted as strategies for creating solidarity, trust, and a culture of care (Mohanty 1988; Lorde 2003). Hence, questions of (self-) purposes and interpretational sovereignty on stage arise, leading to the various acts and priorities at stake.

The meeting is like a stage, on which an NGO employee—in this case, Ahmed— gets the opportunity to express his needs and motivations in order to get funding for a specific project his organization is supposed to realize. A performance often establishes expectations, an official image, and a framework. The stage serves a place where social actions become visible. The performance anticipates many exercises.

The meeting room functions as a stage—the center of the action—and at the same time, there are positions and procedures: Ahmed had to come to the office; Marcel received him and led the meeting. As long as Marcel was not in the room, nothing significant happened. Despite Zara's importance to the meeting and the project-related work, she remained invisible and in the background. She becomes visible when Marcel needs her help and consciously assigns or leaves the work to Zara. For example, Zara was tasked with building trust and closeness in the partnership through small talk at the beginning of the meeting. Then, at the end, Marcel tasked Zara with telling Ahmed that he needed to eliminate the "beautification" section.

Two possible interpretations describe the main aim of the meeting, depending on the actor's position: From the NGO's perspective, the aim was to find a potential new project to support. From Ahmed, it was to convince Marcel and Zara with his project proposal. Ahmed's primary intention was to safeguard workplaces and positions. He wanted to make sure that the project was going to be supported financially. From experience, he already knew how the meeting would most likely be structured and proceed. From the international organization's perspective, the goal was to find a project that fit the profile of the new strategic plan adopted by Marcel's unit, burnishing it with women-related projects. For this purpose, Marcel was looking for new projects to support, whether initiated by existing partners or new ones. A localized, situational context is unique. However, I argue that patterns such as these correlate to certain structural features of the NGO system as a whole, along with its networks. I identify this system's moral component thusly: Its morality is manifested in the underlying obligations and accountability that determine the relationship between a donor and donees. The reciprocal gift relationship connected with moral economies is explicit here, and its structures and dependencies become manifest.

The meeting indicates an asymmetrical dependency: RIPE is dependent on Marcel's unit. Although they tried to create a collaborative working environment by setting up a friendly, cooperative atmosphere, it was clear which party was in the dominant position. Such hierarchies are visible, for instance, in the exclusionary moment in the first act when Ahmed arrives. Although he lives in Lebanon, his homeland and the place he belongs, he had to undergo several vetting procedures before being included as a member of the meeting, where he was expected to offer his local knowledge to the international organization.

Even when at least two different parties collude with each other, they pursue their interests. At the same time, they refer to themselves as partners and eventually, they both consent to an agreement. The meeting procedure is usually anticipated and influenced by existing collaborations, research, and gossip from international organizations with highly valued opinions. The search for partners with similar interests often entails the invitation of preselected potential partners. Such a form of partnership is formally designated in agreements and contracts as well as dialogue. Following this thought, it is evident that contradictions between actions and words might appear due to different social realities and settings-specific topics or moments are negotiated and therefore reproduced.

A comprehensive perspective on the donor-donee relationship allows for binaries in that relationship to be demystified; such binaries too quickly assign the roles of "savior" and "victim" (Groz 1995). It is essential to include in the analysis history between the two roles: First, to be aware of how long such a partnership has existed. Second, the life story of the NGO—that is, how long it has been established as an institution—and also how long the donor's agency has operated in the fields at hand (i.e., the geographical location but also the issues they work on). It is easier to examine what such background contributes to the identities of both parties.

In anthropology, organizational theory showed that NGOs resemble bureaucratic systems of state-run institutions and tend to prioritize their own internal "system goals" of maintenance and longevity over meeting official policy goals (Mosse 2013: 233). NGO representatives try to prove their strategic and diplomatic skills by taking the most beneficial steps for their organizations. What is intriguing, then, is to attempt to discern possible motives for evasiveness and subtlety—such as unspoken politics and personal interests.

I see remaining vague as the best strategy the best strategy for changing the internal dynamics of meetings rather than tackling external, more noticeable, and contested goals. Furthermore, there is a regularity to meetings: they are routinized and often follow the same pattern time and again, especially where project proposals are concerned.

After the greetings, a donee presents their project summary. The NGO points out the most relevant issues in it and answers the donor's questions. They primarily discuss financial matters, along with potential reporting deadlines and the importance of transparency. The language an NGO employs in meetings is short, repetitive, and full of buzzwords (Cornwall

2007; Bornstein 2016). These are empty signifiers, general enough to invite (easily or not) a general assent.

After discussion of financing, negotiations start. In his role as a *money-receiver* or *project leader asking for money*, Ahmed attempted to guarantee his employees (and himself) a stable income over the lifespan of the next project, which typically is a period of two years. Technicalities and subsistence aside, Ahmed also wanted to emphasize the relevance of his project and its content, which was supposed to benefit women in the future. To better understand why Ahmed wanted to promote the project without neglecting all its sub-initiatives, it is helpful to first consider what projects look like and what kind of activities they include. Such a perspective offers a glimpse of how the balancing act that is necessary between multiple layers of the project is negotiated. NGOs talk about their projects a great deal. I compare the process with obtaining a university degree, as creating a proposal is not unlike writing a proposal for a research project in science. One roughly sketches one's ideas in broad, mainstream language, one uses strong mainstream terms. There is often no space left to go into detail. In early stages of fieldwork, I found it distracting that during meetings or in reports, people remained highly vague—in their description of their project, their advocacy for it, its budget, and its measurable outcomes (for example, quantifiable result confirms an evaluation of the undertaken activities an initiative entails). Mostly this emerges in the form of a workshop and, consequently, documents, graphics, pictures, and social media announcements. I see vagueness as having its functions as well. A proposal is first and foremost a vision, an attempt to plan the future and put it into words and numbers. Moreover, since success is measured according to how well the future and the design for it are brought into harmony, it is necessary to be vague; in reality, the future is never congruent with visions of it. At the center of RIPE's antecedent project was a proposal to found a women's center a socially challenged neighborhood in Tripoli. Notably, women were to be given the opportunity to gather in a public "safe space", which was to be inaccessible to men (except the social worker and NGO employees, most of whom were men).

While the scene makes the external processes and roles visible, the analysis of the "backstage" practices shows how the actual understanding and decision-making processes take place behind the scenes.

6.5 The Backstage

This section deals with the backstage and with the decisions and actions taken there. However, ethnographic data on the backstage is limited; after the meeting, follow-up was only possible from the donor's point of view, and even then, only in an abbreviated form. The backstage perspective of Ahmed and his NGO, RIPE, remains completely invisible.

The backstage belongs to the primary setting but presents a modified version of the stage. It stays within the framework of the front stage. The setting, social codes, and norms are the same, but it is not the front stage. As the name indicates, "backstage" is the absence of the stage, so it is not part of the performance of the scene. I argue that actions which happen backstage are also relevant to the performance on the stage, as practices, habits, and the actions planned for onstage are rehearsed here. Conversations and discussions are prepared in advance work, and consequential changes occur. The meeting is prepared and rehearsed in advance, including the way the proposal's goal is framed, the project's aim, and the organization's general agenda. The meetings are also analyzed, commented on, reviewed, and processed afterwards.

Marcel's unit asked Ahmed to once again summarize the request for the project and clarify its objectives. Such a repetitive procedure, a ritual of action and planning for a project, helps a donor perform their audit.

Although Ahmed had left, he was still an essential actor in the scene. He was acting as a catalyst for a dynamic mediation of intersubjectivity. Marcel disagreed with the draft of the proposal. He made a decision and Zara was the one who had to deal with its consequences. It was interesting to observe, in this meeting, at least, that Marcel made his decision as soon as Ahmed was no longer onstage. He decided quickly and did not discuss his decision, which involved changes, further with Zara. He did not seek further information. I found it interesting to observe that while Marcel could have voiced his dissatisfaction with the category of "beautification" directly to Ahmed, he instead waited until he had left the stage (and the conference room).

One of the most relevant points here is that these interactions are offstage, meaning that all actions have taken place *behind*: behind the curtain, behind the scenes, behind formality or formal settings and reserved for a small, specific audience. It represents a space where actions could turn out in unexpected ways, unfiltered.

One possible interpretation is that, from a donor's perspective, the donee's performance in the meeting is their "time to shine" onstage. Since Ahmed had extensive experience in international development, cooperation, and aid and already had had a professional relationship with Marcel's unit, such moment was quite common for him, even routine. He knew how to write and perform a script, how to follow the procedures required of him, and how to adjust where necessary. Through the idea of a script, I understand what Goffman meant by communication or (non-)communication of roles: a system composed of rules and normative which guide the navigation of social interactions, and the roles played. Records maintain the ways roles are structured, including the rules they entail. Transcripts operate as a kind of grid, gluing the spectacle together. The transcript also dictates the dialogue, verbal and otherwise, between actors, be it non-verbal or verbal in nature. Therefore, the roles above are always connected to a transcript, which prescribes their behavior. Roles can be flexible, allowing for improvisation and adjustment in response to unforeseen, unscripted occurrences. Goffman uses the term "special role" (2017: 129-152) and "outside communication" (2017: 153-188) for such a category, where he describes deviant behavior or performance outside of the game's established rules. Goffman shows that it is possible to deviate from a transcript and still be on stage, part of the ensemble and participating in the acting out of roles (2017: 73-98). Moreover, this shows the flexibility and dynamism a performance entails despite its rules and function within a larger system.

Ahmed is an expert in dealing with meetings and project proposals. Most probably he knew what questions Marcel and Zara will pose even before the meeting. This naturally raises the question of why, despite his many years of experience, he would include the category of "beautification" in his budget. He could have chosen a standardized category (or at least one more commonly used in NGO settings and jargon) or even a buzzword, which would further hinder and complicate the application process. It amazed me that Ahmed made the choice he did, knowing that dealing with it would necessitate several processes—that it would be, in other words, time- and labor-intensive.

There are several possible explanations. It may well be that Ahmed, a seasoned expert and actor on the meeting stage, wanted to deliberately distract attention from another, more high-priority item in the budget. This might have been something related to organizational, content, or even administrative issues. Alternatively, it is possible that Ahmed could not study the budget list carefully enough due to his heavy, labor-intensive workload. During the small

talk between Ahmed and Marcel at the beginning of the meeting, I overheard him say that he had recently returned from a business trip abroad. Meetings are continually being cancelled, so it is not uncommon for content up for discussion to be overlooked.

As I have mentioned several times, such meetings are very routine. If no concrete new adjustments are made in the absence or between meetings, their repetitiveness can mean that the details of individual meetings fade into the background. Another explanation could be that one of Ahmed's employees wrote the proposal, as is often the case. Project managers are often the ones who do this work, but they remain in the background. It is generally directors who represent organizations to the outside world, especially when it comes to donors on the international stage. I would argue that this was the case in Zara and Marcel's working relationship; Zara took on responsibility for content and local expertise and, to a great extent, communication with the grassroots actors. This also meant that Zara was the one who communicated further steps in project processes. This also meant that she sometimes had to communicate funding cuts or the termination of partnerships when such situations arose. At the same time, project managers take care of replacing certain headings in the budget with buzzwords, restructuring the proposal and adapting the work of the project accordingly. Another interpretation might be that Ahmed had already presented the proposal in a meeting with another donor, where it had received a different reaction, motivating him to leave this section as is.

A final way to interpret Ahmed's actions is that he simply wanted to defy the guidelines he was expected to follow, excluding all the expected buzzwords and testing how much latitude he had. He did this knowing that he was already familiar with Marcel's unit, its work, and its vision and therefore (he may have assumed) with what Marcel was looking for—that is, more advanced projects with the same subject matter. Ahmed may also have been aware that partnering with an unfamiliar organization would require much more time and effort for Marcel and Zara. Besides, a project without demonstrable results and outcomes that proved its legitimacy would be a risky one for a donor to be accountable for supporting.

6.5 Boundary Objects and Hidden Agendas

For quality assurance, donors must evaluate projects according to document formats called audits (Strathern 2018), which they, in turn, submit to their donor as accountability.

This is done through what are called boundary objects. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, boundary objects are dynamic objects with a familiar structure that is modified according to a situational context (Star 2010). According to communication scientist Susan Leigh Star, boundary objects even derive from situations (2010: 603). The meeting becomes a part of a longer process. What results is more an arena in which issues are addressed than a meeting as such. The donor and donee organizations both prepare the proposal in various situations. The work this requires includes networking, writing a draft proposal, and collecting information. In the end, the boundary object needs to be refined—the term "beautification" and the money linked to it are removed. The two parties meet, then articulate and exchange shared interests and knowledge. They decide what tangible benefits for women's rights and empowerments are likely to result. If there isn't any money involved, projects that seek to improve life conditions cannot take place. The concept of the boundary object is a helpful analytical tool for such a procedure. The idea helps to explore how the meaning of an item can differ according to the contexts in which it is constructed and used; how an object travels from one context to another; and what transformations it may undergo as a result. Structures and a donor-NGO relationship emerge. Social performances mirror institutionalized conditions and (re-)produce dominant discourses.

In the case of the meeting being examined, this is the case for the budget, especially the "beautification" section. Based on these boundary objects, it becomes clear that despite the asymmetry of power relations, where the donors to the donees are at the longer lever, an interdependence emerges. This becomes visible through intentions that are unspoken or even hidden—the "hidden agendas" mentioned earlier.

The word "hidden" could be misconstrued here, as an understanding based in moral binaries: The term means that something is not visible, remains covered, or is protected. In a more metaphoric reading, "hidden" is the counterpart of openness, transparency, and even honesty. This particular meaning of the word, I argue, relies on a binary worldview which separates good from evil, sincere from insincere; consequently, secret-keeping is seen as dishonest, unrighteous, and morally wrong. In such a view, performance (or "acting") is artificial and therefore inauthentic, not real. Nevertheless, I argue that if we cease to think in categories such as "real" and "unreal" (and stop overvaluing that which is supposedly honest or transparent over that which is artificial or pretend), then performance and role-playing can be accepted as more commonplace, neutral aspects of social interaction. I see the concept of

hidden agendas as connected to Garfinkel's "missing what" question, which I posed at the beginning of this chapter. Hidden agendas are used to further unravel the complex relationship between donor and donee. Their effects, I assume, are most evident in local contexts.

In this section, I will proceed as follows: First, I will illustrate the concepts of "boundary object" and "hidden agenda" through the "list" and "beautification". Second, I will illustrate these two concepts through the triad of women's beauty, "beautification", and projects in relation to public presence.

The List

The initial concern of the meeting was the financial proposal, presented in document form and through lists. The donor needed to accept the request. Throughout the meeting, it became evident that the focus rested on the budget, particularly on its itemized list of expenses. The budget operates as a control mechanism and audit tool, one that establishes accountability for the use of money. The document determines in advance what performances will take place during the meeting, as well as which actors are cast in specific roles. The NGO actor (the donee) needed to account for how their organization would spend the money they had requested from the donor. Before that, the donee's organization had to provide an update for and summary of the project. The NGO's representative also had to give information about local political circumstances relevant to the project's setting. The donee, therefore, had to share local knowledge. The itemized expense list and the images of women are ethnographic artifacts showing how the importance of words, framing, and pictures depends on relationality, context, and interpretation.

How did the document in particular influence the budget? The organization Zara and Marcel work for possesses guidelines for how documents in support of projects are to be presented in front of their donors. The format they have to follow limits documents to two pages with a maximum of five paragraphs per page. They therefore needed to adapt the formatting of the proposal they received from Ahmed, reducing the number of pages and topics covered. The budget consists of an Excel sheet, a universal format. However, rubrics vary, so it was up to Marcel and Zara to find ways to include Ahmed's concept of "beautification" as they understood it. Evaluation and audit culture (Strathern 2000) seem to

be of great concern in NGOs' work environments. They are relevant to the donor, Marcel's unit, the implementer of the project, RIPE, and smaller local partners who help to facilitate the project's initiatives on the ground.

NGOs broker or translate project designs, which are comprised of agenda requirements, conventions, and agreements. Documents such as papers, reports, and certificates—in the sense of "distinct cultural artifacts" (Riles 2006: XX)—hold such information and data. As clearly emerged from the meeting, evaluation procedures are time-consuming and multilayered, involving the participation of various actors on different scales. Documents are negotiated at different levels and serve to legitimize and account for the purpose. Since donors and donees are all working within a global framework, operating in various locations worldwide, communication often happens via email and phone or Skype calls. Such multimedia communication is highly flexible and dynamic. However, it can also detract from the "efficiency" of evaluation procedures in circumstances in which a strong, regular internet connection cannot be guaranteed. Documents are frequently revised and rewritten, leading to a high likelihood of some actors missing out or not being updated. The entire procedure of an evaluation can be seen as essentially an obligation, a repetitive institutional routine in which few new developments are likely to occur.

In other words, it is a constant repetition of the same process. Often, documents circulate between actors at various levels before once again ending up in a meeting about project implementation (Riles 2006). This circulation of documents suggests to me that there is often nothing new in the texts. It is a performance on the front stage, yet it seems that there are many more things going on backstage.

Marcel's priority in the meeting was to receive reassurance that the project fulfilled the standard requirements. Based on such expectations, Marcel has a responsibility to be absolutely transparent with his organization's main office regarding his collaboration with Ahmed's organization; he is also obligated to stick to the agency's agenda. Like Ahmed, Marcel is also accountable for both his own job and those of his employees. Marcel knows that the funding Ahmed seeks to secure represents not only an opportunity for women to improve their living conditions, but also secure salaries for the NGO staff—even if it is only for the next two years. Marcel also has to pay attention to the funding requirements established by the agency's headquarters, which is in turn held accountable for the money spent by its staff. As Marcel explained, if they cannot justify their spending, they may not receive additional money

for the next funding period. In other words, even Marcel was afraid of not receiving funding to continue current partnerships with NGOs on the ground. A cut in financing at this level would not have as severe an impact as the same cut made on the ground. However, Marcel's reputation—both in his field and on the international scene—would be in jeopardy. The agency wants to be recognized as a progressive, international, and humanitarian player that supports and executes projects on local, domestic, and international stages. Marcel performed his role, that of a donor listening to the description of a project's content in a meeting, the proceedings of which he led on the front stage. He further navigated its moral economies, maintaining the structure of a partnership between Ahmed's organization and his own.

These economies can be conceptualized in terms of the classic ideas of anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski (1935), Marcel Mauss [1954] (2016) and Maurice Godelier (1999). They have shown that reciprocal relations and relationships are essential to human interactions. They have also shown that social ties are always mutual. To this general finding, Malinowski added that such "give and take" relations are omnipresent in social interactions. Nevertheless, he regards this exchange solely as functional. Relations in which gifts are given and received always invoke to the chain of an object that travels and becomes transformed. After Latour (1999) or Tsing (2009), the chains of objects and their order is decisive for the overall view's logic of actions and individual consideration. Give and take relations also exist with regard to the values that underpin economy, morality, and law. Consequently, societal constraints on responding to gifts emerge. These constraints comply with the forces inherent to a gift, according to Marx' concept of goods as a fetish (1859). Reciprocity can be disrupted and give and take relations always require a service in return— a counter-performance. Marcel navigated these economies: His questions about specific indicators and framings in the meeting were designed to guarantee accountability. He was obliged to ask questions regarding the project and the spending of money in particular. He acted like a donor who listen and gives advice but—and this my point—does not make promises to potential collaboration partners and receivers of money, even though guarantees were implicitly made when Ahmed entered the meeting. I am trying to say here that Marcel avoided promising too much while still offering hope. However, his performance as in made it more or less asymmetrical and uneven relationship.

The Rubric of "Beautification"

When Ahmed mentioned the word "beautification", it was striking to everyone present. For the donor, this word, and the concept behind it were the reason why RIPE had to explain the research proposal in the meeting and then revise it afterwards, as I learned backstage once Ahmed left. The word itself carries a variety of meanings. All these associations evoke the idea of a transformational experience and the imperative of aesthetically improving an object or motive to fit a viewer's ideas about what is attractive. One possible intention behind Ahmed's use of the word "beautify" and his idea of "hanging up pictures of beautiful women" may have been that these figures shaped and changed Lebanese history and society. These female figures were supposed to create a narrative related to the country's history. They would act as a counterpart to the posters of men who had died in war and conflicts.

According to Ahmed's proposal, another instance of "beautification" could be women's empowerment and peacebuilding through cleaning the streets cleaning those streets that crossed the main road, which demarcated the lines of neighborhood conflict. To a degree, Ahmed referred to the stereotypical image of women having the final say when it comes to decoration, as well as inherent good taste and skill when it comes to arranging things. However, this reading may be simplistic, since in Lebanon, shaping public space has been a role typically assigned to men. While in domestic spaces, Lebanese women are often in charge of decoration. This includes decorating for domestic activities such as birthday parties, holiday celebrations, festivities, and dinners. However, when it comes to public space, it is often men's duty to decorate and beautify—in restaurants, for example, or the hair of the women in hair salons and beauty parlors. One very rarely sees a woman working as a professional street cleaner in Lebanon. Applied to Ahmed's proposal that women sweep streets, plant trees, and paint colorful murals, this context suggests that the women would be doing tasks that tend to have masculine connotations in public space.

It is also necessary to bear in mind where RIPE's project was to occur: it is not Beirut, characterized by its fragmented international features, but Tripoli. Tripoli and its surroundings

are often described as one of the poorest regions in Lebanon.⁴⁰ In economically weak areas,⁴¹ conservative forces (both religious and otherwise) dominate politics and public space. In Tripoli, divisions along gender, religious, and political and sectarian lines are more geographically (and publicly) visible. Tripolitans (and Ahmed) told me that the city generally follows different codes and logic than Beirut does.

"Conquering" the streets might also be an empowering act for women. Making an appearance and establishing a presence in the streets could be empowering, fostering their visibility and enabling their continued presence and acceptance in this space. From this perspective, the project would grant women access to participation in the public sphere. This could lead to additional forms of participation, such as the discussion of matters that the women regard as urgent and bringing them forward to a broader audience. Street work could also serve as a legitimate reason for family members to go to the center. As Ahmed explained, since the area is part of a considerably more conservative neighborhood, women often remain in the house unless they need to do errands, visit friends, or work. The majority of the activities they participate in take place indoors. From the perspective of an NGO trying to identify this target group—that is, women—and recruit them for possible projects, they simply aren't easy to reach and mobilize. In general, letting people go to an institution run by unfamiliar people (and sometimes even foreigners) might cause skepticism and fear. Doing a project in the streets might help families and others to imagine the center's work, as it openly displays it. Rather than referring to the work in abstract terms, one wants to do awareness-raising work or form a group that participates in local politics.

Consequently, not knowing organizers and their reasons for facilitating events may be an impediment for some (especially women) when it comes to participating in trainings, workshops, and activities offered by centers. NGOs offering activities need to adjust their offerings for locality, including local language and daily life contexts, which is often not in line with NGOs' vocabulary and the buzzwords that they need to use to fit into international

⁴⁰ For more detailed information about Tripoli's reputation see Fournier (2019).

Additionally, since Lebanon lacks official, quantifiable, regularly updated statistics about district classifications, economy, subventions, and population numbers, a space of uncertainty is created. This void (and the official inscrutability of Lebanon's marginal regions) is then filled with unofficial, rival documentation practices in public. They should represent and document data, which are staged and utilized for their own purposes, claiming authority and interpretational sovereignty. For example, martyrs' pictures hang on billboards, the walls of homes, and buildings in public. They are remembrances of belonging, duty, and sacrifice (Volk 2009). For further information, see Volk (2009).

⁴¹ An activist from Tripoli, Hind, told me that Lebanon's south has had a good deal of migration away from it; as a result, it now receives more remittances from the diaspora.

frameworks and resonate with donors' understandings. Consequently, to use Goffman's stage metaphor, NGOs often frame their projects on the front stage in a simple and generalized way. They do little to explain the details of the project's origins and impetuses. I argue that when NGOs communicate well and integrate a modicum of common sense into their proposals, it often leads to greater acceptance and financial support. Further negotiations are then built upon that foundation.

One reason for NGOs' simplified communications is the complexity of their organizations, which is difficult for outsiders to entirely grasp. This is similarly the case for NGOs' projects themselves. Although they look simple at first glance, they usually turn out to be more complicated, particularly with regard to the procedure for getting them approved, established, and practically implemented. They need to be transformed, adjusted, and applied in everyday life, meeting local needs, beliefs, and culture (such as habits, rules, and social norms).

Initially, I was often astonished at the discrepancies between project description and practical implementation, which I observed and experienced during my fieldwork. This is because vagueness also has a function in negotiating a project proposal in a meeting with a donor, as I mentioned earlier. Buzzwords and general terms such as "empowerment", "women's leadership", and "participation" have to align with specific events and routines in local settings. These local needs often do not match with the vocabulary of NGOs or international aid and development programs.

At first, Ahmed's use of the word "beautification" appeared not to suit the occasion. The proposal officially fell under the category of reconciliation and peacebuilding. To analyze this in more depth, I relate once more to Goffman's "hidden agendas", bringing the idea together with the work of British anthropologist James Scott (2013). He has explored modes of subaltern resistance employed by agricultural workers in India against the imposition of agrarian reforms. Examining a similar context dealing with grassroots activism and action, I argue that hidden agendas are not only manifestations of resistance to a given work setting, vocabulary, or economic system. However, hidden agendas also maintain and enable the navigation of paternalistic relationships between donor and donee.

Forms of (small) resistance follow patterns of local demand and circumstance and adjust themselves according to daily life practices and experiences. In that respect, Ahmed had to adjust the project from what he considered appropriate to something more realistic

with regard to implementation. For instance, women needed to be given space and opportunities in order to feel safe and secure joining activities at the center. This component—protecting and taking care of women—is also part of the localized aim of enhancing women's participation and visibility. As the example of Ahmed showed above, to be able to comply with such a hidden agenda—that is to rely on mere "assumptions" to realize projects in a way that would be safely accessible for women—appropriate tactics are required accordingly.

Hassan one of the only male employees of a women's NGO in Tripoli, confirmed that the framing of program contents sometimes depends on their front or backstage relation. Hassan underlined his statement with an example: Let us suppose that a program is required to conduct an awareness-raising workshop on sexual reproduction. In that case, Hassan's organization does not explicitly use the internationally recognized vocabulary on sexual rights and production, written and codified in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).⁴² Instead, he uses familiar Arabic expressions to explain the workshop's content and its details and attract the attention of potential participants. Hassan stated that they frame such a workshop as a family workshop, where participants can bring their children with them and get informed about children's nutrition, care, and education. With such a workshop agenda, women are invited more regularly to participate. In addition to granting women better access, sometimes men need to be involved too. This creates access to the target group and their associated community and at the same time makes the organization more accessible. Thus, Hassan's organization tries to create transparency around the content of their activities and workshops, building trust with the target group and the community. Any mistrust that might exist can be eliminated. Such a strategy may also help mitigate later opposition to gender-specific workshops, making it possible women to participate on their own. Besides getting the approval of families (and particularly husbands), NGOs and workshop facilitators also need to obtain permission and acceptance from community elders. Such procedures prevent further trouble and negative publicity.

Mireille is the director of the NGO Le Rassemblement Démocratique des Femmes Libanaises (RDFL). RDFL's projects exist across Lebanon. Along with their headquarters in Beirut, RDFL has a more significant outpost in another large coastal city nearby. Like Hassan, Mireille also mentioned the issue of hidden agendas in relation to adjusting them in local settings when dealing with sensitive or reformist topics. Such matters often conflict with social

⁴² For further information see UN (2020 URL).

norms and are sometimes even taboo, she explained. Sexuality is one such taboo, especially women's sexuality and sex before marriage. Mireille contends that RDFL tries to approach those issues with great sensitivity. Once they have gained women's trust and made them feel safe, they then slowly try to tackle such taboo topics. She mentioned that they sometimes start with a focus on the subject of marriage, as one example. Later on, they delve much deeper into detail. In my opinion, NGOs have a dual target group, which means that they have to work on both the front and back stages; that is, toward the donor and parts of their community. For NGOs, this means constant duplication of work, along with the additional work of adjusting and translating project proposals before or during meetings and project visits. The preparation and follow-up for a meeting and the stages with the respective roles may also overlap. The NGOs' work also needs to appropriately project its vision each time.

Nevertheless, according to Maya, a women's NGO campaign leader, most project work is much more concerned with donors than with the project's target groups.

The Image of Women's Beauty and the Idea of "Beautification" in NGO Projects

Women's physical appearance is routinely treated as a common good in Lebanon. The general public and society at large feel entitled to discuss women's appearances and how their bodies should look. People have a tendency to express their opinions about women's physical appearances in ways that go beyond mere comments; many openly judge and compare women. Plastic surgery is widespread and pervasive in almost every social class as many of my informants told me.⁴³

Opinions regarding appearance are usually formulated as insulting, holistic personal critiques. The collective understanding of beauty standards is in line with the establishment of beauty standards, which is invasive and may cross personal and intimate boundaries.

Public beauty standards can also be considered a template for an adjacent form of beauty that people either choose to engage with or ignore. For example, several times during

⁴³ Nadine Labaki's film *Caramel* (2007) fits in with this. The film's Lebanese director places a beauty salon in Beirut at the center of the film's plot. By doing so, she lets her main characters narrate the social constraints related to beauty found in images, ideals, and concepts of value, as well as depicting the multifaceted life contexts of women in Beirut. Labaki's film further depicts women's courage and beauty in dealing with obstacles and the societal constraints women face in Lebanon.

my fieldwork, I heard Lebanese men complain about the artificial image of beauty that Lebanese women are expected to live up to. By contrast, they stated that they preferred the beauty standards that the Western women they had observed in expat scenes seemed to adhere to. I was complimented on my "natural appearance", which allowed for flaws and was perceived as authentic. Nevertheless, in exclusive, upper-middle-class Lebanese settings, both Lebanese women and men propagate the (probably accurate) image of Western women as less neat, negligent, or even sloppy.

European men in the expat scene, on the other hand, regularly expressed admiration for Lebanese women's carefully prepared appearances, agreeing that European women could take better care of themselves. As a result of those observations, personal opinions, and values such as these influence which images of beauty are idealized.

Several times, people I encountered during my fieldwork made a comparison between women's beauty and Beirut's appearance. Instead of maintaining the old Art Nouveau mansions built during the French mandate, Beirut had mostly allowed tall modern towers to replace them. Here I would like to point out that this way of looking at things is not about unnecessarily magnifying the contrast between the colonial era of the past and the present, modern era, or praising "the good old days" of the colonial era. I interpret my interlocutors' opinions on the changes to Beirut's cityscape as reflecting a view that the demolition of many beautiful, unique buildings is an unavoidable loss. Such losses can be replaced by modern and high-tech high-rise buildings, but these are considered sterile, cold, monotonous, and uniform.⁴⁴ Metaphorically, the city does not want to age. It needs rejuvenation to endure contemporary times. Ancient, exfoliated murals, in turn, are the bearers and messengers of history and the past. This may express Lebanese society's desires or its lack of aspiration to deal with the violent past it had to survive, as some of my interlocutors suggested while talking about Beirut's image and "beautification". The city's imagery can similarly be compared to ideals of a woman's body, her representation in the public sphere, and values related to physical beauty. When social imaginary meets the everyday, material practices of "beautification", it is necessary to consider the impact of the material expressions of particular places and practices (Bourdieu 1998; De Certeau and Mayol 1998; Merleau-Ponty 1961).

⁴⁴ Several civil society initiatives are trying to counteract this trend and stop the increased construction of high-rise buildings, which are often financed by foreign investors. See for example the initiative "Historic Preservation of Homes & Cities" on Facebook.

This analysis of the meeting showed that translation efforts originate in abstract ideas and develop into concrete measurements and realizations. Another essential point is continuance, since Ahmed presented his project as a continuation and advancement of something that already existed. The case of "beautification" as a line item in the budget exemplifies how, in this case, the boundary object as a category does not build bridges but instead separates people. One possible interpretation may be that Ahmed was using "beautification" as a symbol for more general ideas: First, an increase in the visibility of women in public spaces. Second, women's beauty images are a relict of the past, one which the destruction of the civil war did not touch. Rima, from the women's NGO Progress Changes and Action (PCA), once said something similar to me while we were on our way to visit a project. We were stopped at a traffic light and discussing PCA's visions of empowerment. To the left, an oversized, flashing billboard advertised a perfume brand's new fragrance with the image of a woman. To our right, a large, newly built skyscraper with glittering windows towered above us. Rima glanced from right to left, then back again. With a serene sigh, she said, "Beauty is the only thing we have left," then shifted up a gear and drove on.

As previously highlighted, this chapter employs Goffman's concept of staging performance as a framework for analyzing NGO-donor interactions. I argue that women's rights projects within NGOs serve as agents of empowerment but also as forms of mimicry, as articulated by feminist theorist Audre Lorde (2003). Lorde's idea suggests that efforts to empower women often replicate colonial or imperial practices that "will never dismantle the master's house." Historically, colonial regimes demanded that the colonized conform to imposed laws, behaviors, and norms—yet, beneath these façades, local actors maintained their agency, subtly resisting or reinterpreting these practices, as Lorde observes in religious and everyday rituals (2003). Applying this perspective to RIPE's project, I propose that organizations may mimic certain empowerment discourses to secure funding, even if their actual practices diverge from these external narratives.

The example of the "beautification" proposal exemplifies how mimicry functions in negotiations—sometimes as a subtle form of resistance, other times as a strategic way to conceal true interests. These performative tactics reveal how power and hierarchies are staged and reproduced within NGO meetings. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing performativity and the reproduction of power in international development contexts.

Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how global interdependencies and power relations are negotiated locally through staged acts—roles enacted by NGOs and donors—within meetings that resemble rehearsed yet improvisational performances. Using my framework of staging, boundary objects, and hidden agendas, I reveal how funding discussions extend beyond mere financial exchanges to encompass debates around women's rights and empowerment. These negotiations often involve acts of mimicry and resistance, shaping how projects are proposed, interpreted, and ultimately supported.

7. Sanctions, Authority, and Agency in International Aid in Lebanon

7.1 Introduction

"How is Lebanon going to manage, and how can we help?" asked Roger, a European project officer from an international institution. He posed this question, indicating an offer of cooperation and partnership with Lebanon's institutions, during an interview. As an employee of an international organization, Roger proposes a specific kind of collaboration; he grants help and services. For that, he needs to get an overview of the environment and the local conditions. Then he offers his assistance, framed by political and practical guidelines and interests.

In his offer of help, Roger aims to reassure, acknowledge, and give an idea of what "help" might look like. Such aid implies a controlling mechanism or authority somewhere along the way. Employees of international aid institutions assess societal needs and potential ways to address them in meetings with local partners, commissioned studies, and informal talks and gatherings. The agency of international aid acts as an authorizing force. Under its umbrella, Roger uses the word "Lebanon" to suggest transformation and a social change that embraces law, politics, norms, and culture. Guidelines and standard measurements are mostly quantitative in nature. This raises what at first appears to be a straightforward question: How can international aid eventually gain access to partners, projects, and organizations on the ground?

On closer inspection, however, the relationship that is called a "partnership" or "collaboration" in the context of international aid and intervention turns out to be more complex. Such relationships are characterized by valuable incentives, which affect the nature of the partnership by interventions, even if it is only marginal at their expenses. Therefore, the relationship itself (between at least two parties) is hierarchical and contains a power discrepancy; one party assists in the implementation or maintenance of the other's projects or organizations.

The scope of interventions in international humanitarian and development⁴⁵ cooperation is heavily influenced by the actions of international actors, who also enact and

⁴⁵ Mosse and Lewis (2005: 4) define development as "a historical discourse of the power of the West over the 'developing' world" in the following: "Complexity of policy as an institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organizations and professionals and the diversity behind policy models and the perspective of actors themselves." I agree with this definition and will utilize it.

enforce these boundaries. These actors include not only international organizations but also state outposts and diplomatic services. However, this chapter does not examine their organizational structures. Instead, it focuses on their interpretative sovereignty and the power it confers—capabilities they carry into the context of international aid.

Here I will introduce the term "international agency"⁴⁶, which refers to the interpretative sovereignty of international actors that I have just explained. Agency is how power expresses itself. Its compelling force to initiate actions marks a capacity for the exercise of power. Theorizing agency in this way, as both a concept and something to be applied in practice, international agency represents power through its presence in local settings and its exercise by international actors through political and humanitarian international interventions. Even at times when the scope of international interventions is transferred to the local setting, their prerogative interpretation and decision-making processes represent situated power. Through development ideas and tools, international actors exercise their power and agency on an international level, donors who operate as agents of state power. This kind of statehood is mostly internationally directed but also has a strong influence on and in local contexts.

In this chapter, I analyze how international actors maintain their legitimacy and right to exist. To this end, I explore how international actors use evaluation tools and techniques.⁴⁷ Additionally, I examine the interpretative sovereignty of international aid and its agenda, legality, and field of work. I analyze the limits of international actors' autonomy and *raison*

⁴⁶ In the introductory chapter, I introduced agency as one of the core concepts in my theoretical framework. The overall theoretical framework of agency shows a feminist agency that involves aspects of intersectionality, inclusion, and equality among women. This particular kind of agency illustrates women's self-determination and ability to act and react. However, I draw the concept of this kind of agency from the original definition of agency, taken from the idea of structuration put forth by Antony Giddens (1984). Giddens is an invaluable contributor to practice theory, along with Pierre Bourdieu (1998), Michel Foucault (1977) and Sherry Ortner (1984; 2006). The focus on agency that is visible in structures that are performed in daily life is something I looked closely at in the previous chapter on staging and the emergence of the donor and NGO (donee) relationship.

However, I would like to focus on a specific form of power, namely that of international organizations within international cooperation and foreign policy. International agency in this respect is discussed as the powerful influence of international organizations on local affairs and the design of projects. I do not want to cause any further confusion between institutional characteristics and the form of an agency or its most significant feature. Therefore, throughout this chapter, I use the phrases "international actors" or "international aid organization" instead of an "international agency."

⁴⁷ I draw upon these and other tool kits: <https://www.adb.org/documents/series/gender-checklists>; <http://eugender.itcilo.org/>; <https://www.oecd.org/derec/adb/tool-kit-gender-equality-results-indicators.pdf>; https://www.gdnonline.org/resources/ECJ_toolkit_final_.pdf; http://api.commissiomer.nl/docs/os/i71/i7111/def_guide-gender_climate_change_20_march_2014.pdf, please see annexes 2, 3, 4 (and possibly 5) towards the end of the document.

d'être despite their superiority in the context of matters related to international work. Such simultaneous autonomy and restraint provide information on the scope of action taken by international actors, which is limited and heavily regulated by international agreements and political agendas and sanctions. I examine internal mechanisms within this global regime of international law and conventions, combined with philanthropic and universal care and their transformation through development and humanitarian action.

The conceptual framework of the *moral economy* (Thompson 1980) is essential to understanding the emotional dimensions at play in international aid and interventions. This framework, however, also underpins what Ahmed (2004) describes as the *affective economy*, which focuses on how emotional exchanges, bonds, and sentiments shape relations and practices within the field of development and humanitarian aid.

In the Lebanese context, development and humanitarian work are increasingly regarded as economic inputs that influence and sustain the broader political economy of the country. These forms of aid do not operate in isolation but, rather, *(re)form* and *(re)order* systems of care and support within state institutions, reshaping power dynamics, responsibilities, and moral obligations. Ahmed's perspective highlights how global affective economies structure and influence partnerships between local and international organizations, producing emotional bonds of solidarity, duty, and responsibility that deeply embed themselves in the organizational practices and relationships.

By conceptualizing aid through these interconnected economic and emotional logics, we see how moral and affective dimensions are not merely ancillary but core to the operational and relational structures that shape international interventions and local responses in Lebanon.

On the other hand, the focus is on the practical tools and resources used to launch projects at the local level. Foreign policy changes and interests shape such resources, impacting local actors, and their project funding and content. Their response to change is therefore central to this chapter. Specifically, and empirically, there is a clear humanitarian shift in development cooperation. I therefore ask to what extent NGOs are responding to this in concrete terms. The ethnographic material exemplifies and their impact on grassroots NGO projects (due to partnerships and relationships as well as interpretative sovereignty) are associated with it are expressed how shifts in international developmental and humanitarian assistance.

I deliberately use the word "sanctions" due to its double-sided meaning: it can be both punishment and reward, stating or representing power. Sanctions can also mean the representation of power or power that is represented, or representation created through power. International interventions are laden with ideologies of charity, generosity, and helpfulness, which are reflected in humanitarian and development work. Since the staff of international institutions often take the lead in interventions or activist initiatives in international aid, they are also empowered to make decisions in those cases. In other words, they take measures within their scope of action and allow interventions or activist initiatives to continue. I thus suggest that such measures can also be understood as sanctions, linked in a broader sense to economic conditions.

In the course of this thesis, I examine how women's rights organizations work on the legal transformation of rights. Each chapter of this topic builds on the previous ones and contributes to answering the central research question: How do actors in the field of international development and human rights influence and shape change at the legal level? In particular, this chapter shows that work on legal transformation is closely linked to ideas and practices that result both from the humanitarian understanding of international aid and how women's rights NGOs are confronted with these ideas in their everyday practice. The diverse influences and expectations that shape international aid programming significantly influence how NGOs develop their strategies, design projects and respond to challenges.

This chapter is structured as follows: In the first section, I discuss international intervention and humanitarianism in their historical context to show how international humanitarianism has grown and through which regulations and historical episodes it has done so. I then build a bridge to the theory of moral and affective economies, which is relevant in analyzing the interpretative autonomy of international institutions in the context of international aid. In the second section, I examine the culture of management and its techniques and tools. In the third and last section, I analyze changes in international aid and how local actors and international organizations have reacted to them, along with their strategies for managing transformation. This section proves that the relationships between development, human rights, and humanitarian approaches are as multi-faceted and unpredictable in theory as they are in practice. In practice, the boundaries between categories and approaches are mutable.

This chapter also shows that debates around humanitarianism increasingly mix up aspects of the local setting, compassion, and the connection between human rights and developmental and humanitarian approaches. Thus, they and their combined practices contribute to a different form of international humanitarianism.

7.2 International Humanitarianism and Its Interventions

History and International Framework

There is a historical trajectory to the practice of international intervention, beginning with the colonialism of France and Britain. However, my analysis focuses on the form of intervention that was shaped after the creation of international agencies in the wake of World War II—most notably, the United Nations—and the subsequent strengthening of the international community through human rights treaties and conventions. These agreements aim to hold states accountable for upholding conditions they have committed to legally. In particular, development and humanitarian actions have been adapted to ensure that actors in conflict or emergency situations—where basic rights to protection, security, and justice are not guaranteed—are held responsible.

Nevertheless, despite the diplomatic negotiations taking place at the global level, international interventions often reflect the political interests of domestic and regional actors. In this process, power relations are transferred and reproduced across borders. The concept of *localized international agency* refers to a specific structure, context, and history that shape how these interventions influence politics, economics, and society at the local level. This form of agency, understood as a manifestation of power, explains how actors behave and navigate the complex interplay between constraints and opportunities within their respective structures.

Political scientist Michael Barnett (2011) links compassion—the driving force behind much of humanitarianism—and the broader impulse to care with anti-slavery movements, primarily in 19th-century United States. Barnett also discusses how the atrocities of the two World Wars and associated genocides, which are now recognized as such in international law, have shaped humanitarian frameworks. Furthermore, he connects these developments to the end of the Cold War and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans during the

1990s. This period saw the rise of international agencies and their growing influence in global politics, culminating in the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).⁴⁸

Conflict situations that justify or necessitate humanitarian intervention have shifted from clearly bounded categories to a complex, overlapping network of connections across politics, law, technology, and society. The once-distinct boundaries—both between actors and their actions—have become blurred or inconsistent. The causes, motives, and justifications for intervention, along with the technologies used to govern, monitor, and legitimize these actions, have evolved significantly (Teitel 2011: 8–10).

This ongoing shift reflects a move away from a homogenous, generalized view of intervention. The geographic scope is no longer confined by nation-states, and actors are no longer solely categorized as either state or non-state (Teitel 2011: 12–13). The traditional dualisms—perpetrator vs. victim, savior vs. downtrodden, or good vs. evil—no longer accurately describe the complex realities of contemporary interventions.

Despite these changes, the power to make final decisions remains largely with the interventionist outside forces. This creates an ongoing process of "othering", which sustains and reinforces their unequal influence. Such othering manifests in the idea of conducting humanitarian action abroad, often with hierarchically structured priorities that regard some concerns as more urgent or relevant than others. Humanitarian work outside national borders is typically aimed at the most vulnerable groups—those deemed most in need of assistance and victims of severe hardship.

By "outside", I refer to conditions and actions that occur clearly beyond the territorial borders of a given state. International law, functioning as a tool, and the international community, as the force that enforces it, have established the framework for international humanitarianism within humanitarian and developmental interventions.⁴⁹ This global aid system is composed of various actors: international agencies such as the UN, transnational networks that connect local organizations with these agencies—such as INGOs—NGOs themselves, and diplomatic missions like embassies.

International humanitarianism has its roots in Western notions of liberal and democratic values, originating from Enlightenment ideas in Europe. Its foundation is built upon normative

⁴⁸ For further information, see UN 2020, URL.

⁴⁹ For example, there is the international peace-keeping mission United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in south Lebanon, close to the border with Israel. Established in 1978 due to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanese state territory, this interim solution became a permanent international intervention presence. For further information, see UNIFIL 2020 URL.

frameworks, legal agreements, international political practices, and a moral understanding of aid and help (Barnett 2011; Barnett and Duvall 2004; Barnett and Weiss 2008).

Given these evolving dynamics, understanding the underlying assumptions, values, and practices within humanitarian interventions requires a thorough review of the relevant literature. A detailed examination of anthropological perspectives on humanitarianism is particularly essential, as it provides critical insights into the social, cultural, and political dimensions of aid work. Exploring how anthropology conceptualizes humanitarianism helps to uncover the often implicit power relations, normative frameworks, and cultural appropriations that shape international aid efforts. Therefore, situating this discussion within the broader academic discourse on anthropology and humanitarianism is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of the complex entanglements involved in contemporary intervention practices

Anthropology and Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism signifies an action aimed at preserving or maintaining a certain conception of humanity, but the term itself remains contested (Bornstein and Redfield 2011: 4). Rooted in altruism, humanitarianism functions as an ideological vision—an ideological commitment paired with infrastructural practices (Bornstein and Redfield 2011: 4).

Ticktin points out that "it [humanitarianism] is never simply outside politics" (2011: 279). From a humanitarian perspective, interventions are more than mere political acts; they are embedded within an international legal framework. Typically, interventions are fixed in the present without necessarily aiming for long-term horizons, although long-term humanitarianism increasingly becomes the norm rather than the exception (Feldman 2010). The primary humanitarian goal is often to reduce inequality and restore stability, at least temporarily.

However, I contend that a new form of international interventionism is emerging—one that is both political and ethical. Human rights and development efforts seek to promote social justice and economic well-being, moving beyond a simple "doing good" approach (Fisher, 1997). In particular, human rights strategies focus on rectifying past violations through proper enforcement of laws and legal frameworks, aligning strongly with liberal democratic ideals. Therefore, much of the literature emphasizes the inherent values and ideals that

humanitarianism encapsulates, which reflect a specific perception of humanity (Barnett 2011). A central shared value is compassion, discussed in both secular and religious contexts.

Historically, debates within anthropology have often failed to distinguish clearly between development, humanitarianism, and human rights. Clarifying these distinctions can make the entire process more comprehensible and improve the practical application of theory. Moreover, a comprehensive approach often intentionally overlooks the particularities of individual situations (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). The overarching aim of advocating for humanitarianism, development, and human rights is to improve aspects of the human condition.

I also see the (international) development sector as another domain with its own political economy—what some call the *fourth sector* (WEF 2017). This sector is governed primarily by international forces rather than autonomous internal dynamics. It functions through bureaucratic structures similar to those of states, and its activities are shaped by bi- or multilateral market relations that influence its economic output, benefits, and overall productivity within state boundaries. Conceptually, the economy consists broadly of exchange, relationality, and ownership—all of which are influenced by emotions, habits, and underlying reasons.

What differentiates these realms is their "operationalization" in terms of timeframes, spatial scope, approaches, mechanisms, and focus areas. In practice, humanitarian and human rights approaches often take precedence over development strategies, although the latter historically respond primarily to conflict-related needs. Development approaches tend to be market-oriented and emphasize political and neoliberal paradigms. Their goal is long-term progress, with work designed to create visible, sustained impacts—usually through a top-down process emphasizing empowerment. The language used is technocratic, heavily quantitative, with livelihoods and well-being evaluated via statistics and accountability measures.

Human rights, by contrast, are grounded in the UN Charter of Universal Human Rights⁵⁰ and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which originated in the aftermath of World War II (Teitel 2011: 3-5). This proclamation marked a milestone—a reminder to prevent the forgetfulness or repetition of past war crimes. It guarantees protection for individuals and commits to meeting their basic human needs. The declaration is rooted in European liberal

⁵⁰ UN charter of human rights. See UN 2020 URL.

political theory and represents a shift away from traditional political economy, emphasizing individual dignity and legal equality. Its content encompasses social and economic concerns that require action, promoting equality among all human beings and between women and men. While advocating for inclusivity and diversity, it aspires to a universal standard that binds and unites humanity. Justice is positioned as the foundation for well-being. The language is statutory and philosophical, framing human rights as legally binding norms grounded in moral principles.

Despite its Western—particularly European—origins, the concept of human rights has transformed as it has been vernacularized across diverse local settings, often becoming more concentrated on issues such as women's rights. Many women's rights activists from the Global South, as my informants have conveyed, argue that the universal claim to human rights should also be applicable and meaningful within their contexts. Women, as delegates or active participants in UN commissions and human rights bodies, demand recognition and application of these rights beyond Western frameworks.

Another significant focus in the literature concerns the practice of *international humanitarianism* as it is situated within local contexts (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). This scholarship critically reflects on how power and dependency relationships are made visible in the volatile and often shifting field of humanitarian work. Humanitarian organizations are forced to adapt their structures, contents, and categories—such as target groups like refugees and women—in response to political shifts (Harrell-Bond 1986; Brown and Wilson 2009; Ticktin 2011: 261). These categories are socially constructed and often embedded within Western liberal ideas, framing "civilized" and "democratic" moral values as standards to aspire to. This rhetoric has historically been used to justify intervention and protection in the name of Western liberal democracy, with states that are signatories to UN conventions bearing the responsibility to uphold these standards (Teitel 2011; Ticktin 2014: 275).

The United States, through its aid policies, remains one of the dominant actors in the international aid industry. Its leadership is reinforced by its influence on policy formulation and implementation worldwide, across various levels and actors—including NGOs and foreign ministries. U.S. foreign policy in development and humanitarian aid has become the default reference point within international relations, shaping practices and paradigms for many international actors (USAID 2021 URL). The history and development of American

interventionism thus continue to influence contemporary international aid and humanitarian efforts.

Having explored the anthropological perspectives on humanitarianism and its embedded values, it becomes crucial to also understand the emotional and moral undercurrents that underpin these practices. While humanitarianism is often discussed as rooted in moral principles such as compassion, justice, and legality, these ideals are also mediated through affective and relational dynamics. This leads to the concept of *affective moralities*, which examines how emotions, feelings, and embodied experiences shape moral decisions and power relations within international aid and intervention contexts. Understanding these affective dimensions offers deeper insight into how humanitarian actions are not only governed by rational principles but are also driven and sustained by affective bonds and moral economies.

7.1.2 Moral Meets Affective Economy

This section focuses on why a combination of the moral and affective economies is essential in the international aid industry and humanitarian interventions. Moral obligation and modern relationships based on reciprocal exchange do not simply prevail in the international aid industry. Instead, emotional, affective participation and positioning are also decisive defining the power of international agency. In maintaining individuals' ideas and norms, affects and emotions evoke the strategies and practices of control mechanisms or invoke strategies and practices that resemble control mechanisms. Such practices are translated into project management and its control instances and functions—emotionality benefit from international agency. In turn, the international agency uses and controls them through their emotional connection. In the following, I briefly explain the individual concepts that I am guided by.

British Historian Edward P. Thompson (1980) developed the concept of the moral economy based on reciprocal giving and receiving, which the concept linked to obligations and agreements. One party exchanges services with another under the conditions of a reciprocal gift. The services are only received if there is mutual benefit, which emphasize the receiver as the primary driving force of the agreement. Such an altruistic form is therefore grounded in morality and imbued with an understanding of and desire for justice. The moral economy

embodies a particular corpus of norms, duties, responsibilities, and values. Its moral message can mobilize forces to act. Thompson (1980) elaborated on the concept of moral economies using the rising working class, a labor force that was needed in the industrial economy. The concept contrasts with the ideological notion of the "market economy", which aims to maximize the interests of and benefits to the market within the limits of the law and normative order, excluding any forms of gradual commitment such as loyalty, kinship, or friendship.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss' gift exchange concept (1925) is about the transfer of goods and the practice of social solidarity, which is created through give and take in the form of reciprocal exchange. Such practices can develop into traditions and customs. A variety of legal and social contracts and obligations prevail in the social and moral order. In a moral economy, money flows differently. Such economies are not driven only by neoliberalism and capitalism. This type of economy has a specific method embedding itself into the capitalistic order instead. Moral roles maintain money transfer. The circulation of rights, people, and materiality (re-)shapes and (re-)establishes order repeatedly. Mauss' gift exchange concept (1925) represents a form of solidarity which is established through altruism and humanitarianism (Mauss 1990).

Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2013) conceptualizes emotions based on what they are like before they become "culturalized". This means that cultures construct them through their vocabulary—not cognitively, via language and thought, but through physicality. By physicality, she refers to the subjective bodily experience of one's individuality, which then becomes an intersubjective affective consciousness and culture through social relations and contexts. Following this conceptual framework, the analysis draws on the concept of assemblage developed by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2008 [1987]). It emphasizes social processes as dynamic and contingent, endorsing the understanding of affective states as emerging from and influenced by social configurations. The concept of affective states also incorporates forms of governmentality inspired by Foucault (Duman 2003; Foucault 1996; Koddenbrock 2015), illustrating how effects and social relations intertwine to maintain and exercise power and authority.

This combination of concepts and approaches enables a more nuanced analysis of the complex social realities and processes examined in the present research. Ahmed's concept is related to the intersubjective economics that affect evokes. The affective economy produces affects such as accountability, control, and suffering. These types of economic exchanges

confer authority at the expense of subjects who suffer intentionally and are depicted as in need of salvation (Ahmed 2004).

A brief overview of how moral economy and affective economy are connected in the context of international humanitarianism and aid follows. According to Fassin (2012: 189), moral sentiments are a (pre-)consequence of humanitarian action. However, this analysis prefers to refer to these phenomena as affects. Fassin further argues that these moral sentiments—manifested through values or belief systems—drive the ways people think and feel about humanitarian situations, motivated by compassion, identification, and solidarity. Nonetheless, the moral economy functions similarly to affects within the economy; it is linked to the concept of affective economy. Morality stems from affects, and specific practices in economic contexts evoke these affects through shared values and beliefs. Emotions mediate the expression and experience of relational and social circumstances.

As observed, the motivation to help and the sense of obligation are not always neutral, as they originate from a value system prioritizing those who can assert their needs. Being assertive effectively transfers and projects specific values. Support remains limited to certain notions and beliefs. Interventions are thus constrained, and assistance is often restrained. For this analysis, this implies that the idea of providing help is not inherently democratic, since NGOs—dependent on funding—cannot fundamentally alter the rules of engagement. Instead, they operate within a framework of restraint, whether intentional or unconscious. NGOs must either navigate these constraints or forgo funding. Refusing to comply means saying no and losing the financial support needed for survival and paying staff salaries, effectively monetizing their work.

From the donors' perspective, the most critical concern is the responsible use of funds. Funding support is contingent upon the transparency and clarity of project outputs and outcomes, which must align with donor conditions. Increasingly, pressure on accountability and audit regimes intensifies, especially as Western (generally European) donors face threats of funding cuts due to shifts in domestic politics, regional diplomacy, or international relations.

Due to this, it was often mentioned during meetings and interviews that taxpayers' money belongs to them and, therefore, needs to be spent in the best way possible. Following this narrative, taxpayers are a homogenous group of citizens paying their taxes as part of a reciprocal service relationship with the state, which provides them with public services. These citizens are not directly involved in a project's outcomes, nor are they involved in decision-

making processes; there is no democratic participation. Neither are they citizens of the country in which they wish for projects to be implemented. The money funding the projects, which is alleged to be the hard-earned property of these citizens, is employed for purposes which they assume are not directly related to them or their daily lives. As a result, one of donors' biggest concerns is that the money they receive is spent and invested wisely. Their professional right to exist, involve themselves in certain parts of the world, and represent specific ideals is at stake. Donors run the risk of being displaced and losing their credibility and visibility, making them irrelevant. Therefore, donors' mostly self-serving demands for transparency and accountability are their *raison d'être*. Otherwise, division, units, or departments of international institutions have no justification beyond self-interest.

According to Roger, international interventions are the result of political and humanitarian needs and a request for money. European states therefore "prefer spending money here [in Lebanon and the MENA region] than dealing with refugees [in Europe]." If projects or anything related to them fail, I state, there is a need to assign the blame on someone's behalf. In the rhetoric of donors, this is expressed as "Lebanon does not apply". However, it remains unclear from Roger's narrative whether or not he is acquainted with the human rights body and which of its ratifications Lebanon has endorsed, either with or without reservations. It is also not clear from Roger's statement to what extent he is aware of how international law works, i.e. how agreements and contracts human rights rest on and how they impact international intervention. Larger donor agencies (such as USAID) represent states that are not signatories to the CEDAW convention. In Roger's donor eyes, the major obstacle is that the state does not prioritize human rights discourse and treaties in local political and legal affairs. Roger explained this opinion in relation to statements by the newly elected Minister for Women's Affairs, Jean Ogasapian, about the early marriage campaign. The campaign tackles concerns about the marriage of minors, marital rape, and the combination of both with regard to religious authorities and the law. According to many MPs, such a view does not portray the reality of the world they currently live in. Roger adds that the issue is not relevant to them. International actors direct their criticism toward the Lebanese state's incapacity and lack of interest in applying the agenda of international interventions. As my study has shown, international actors also chide state institutions and those at the grassroots such as NGOs, particularly women's NGOs. I suggest that international agencies regard integral and internal difficulties to institutions and organizations within a state

as a significant impediment to processes of translation. As Roger stated, "There is a big disconnect between knowledge, *savoir-faire*, and the authorities do not follow up the professionalism of civil society. They do not meet with the interests of civil society."⁵¹

Building on the discussion of affective moral economies—that is, how emotions, bonds, and moral sentiments underpin humanitarian and development practices—it is crucial to also consider how these affective dimensions are managed, monitored, and institutionalized through audit cultures. While moral economies highlight the moral and emotional justification of aid, audit regimes operationalize and control these feelings and moral claims through rationalized, quantifiable mechanisms. The interplay between affective moralities and audit practices reveals how power, authority, and legitimacy are not only governed by moral sentiments but also embedded in managerial and control systems that seek to regulate and stabilize humanitarian practices. This connection illustrates how affect and morality are both used to justify interventions and subjected to the formalized routines of project management, reinforcing the hierarchical and control-driven nature of international aid.

7.3 Audit Culture and the Management of International Aid

This section shows how international aid actors practice a project management control regime at different levels. Such a regime uses control bodies and justification mechanisms, which mainly favor the international agency and consolidate and maintain its authority. It is a question of how project work and the cooperation that corresponds to it can be monitored and managed. Accountability can be a means of sanctioning projects. Control and accountability techniques are demonstrated; specifically, these are tools and keywords used in conjunction with managerial jargon (Appel 2015). Instruments and practices of partnership and cooperation are the focus of attention. The tool kit is a general concept commonly used by international aid institutions and their project managers and employees.

Audit culture (Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2015; Shore et al. 2011; Strathern 2000) encompasses control, surveillance, and accountability procedures and techniques, mostly in a

⁵¹ I only use the term "civil society" if other people do so. The reasons for that are explained in chapter 5.

rationalized, quantifiable, and mathematical way (Brenneis et al. 2005; Merry and Conley 2011; Rottenburg et al. 2015). Such a format, I argue, seeks to both justify and legitimize actions, which can be in response to, anticipated by, or followed when it comes to international aid. At the same time, their status allows their executive authority, which is specifically a department of the institution on the ground, to act as the final instance in decision-making. Before I continue with my conversation with Roger, I will discuss what I call "managing projects." Managing mechanisms often turn out to be forms of control and accountability. This governing and regulating also requires structure, one that guarantees the continuity and sustainability of successful project implementation in a donor's eyes. There are many reasons and intentions (i.e., interests and discourses) behind the implementation of a project, which a donor is tied to and responsible for.⁵² However, the other side of managing is social practice and social relations, which means that managing also strongly depends on social interactions and affects⁵³ such as trust, confidence, and reliability. In that respect, I believe that the metaphor of managing a project articulates sociocultural values and moral considerations, (re-)produced by physical and material tools. Those tools have the characteristics of "making effective" and "operating efficient, productive, and evidentiary" as I experienced how the international aid jargon formulates it in internal documents or throughout meetings. That means that the tools produce, advance, and bring things into motion, leading to social development (Apthorpe 2012; Apthorpe and Gasper 2014). These tools of international actors to manage a project on the ground stand in combination with a local actor to put these tools into action and translate these tools into practice and create

⁵² In her article, Susann Appé (2015) discusses the effects and impacts networks in the NGO sector must maintain, nourish, and render visible in the sector itself and what consequences result from these managerial entanglements in terms of the politics of neoliberal economies.

⁵³ There is quite a long history of debates around affects, emotions, and origins within anthropological research. I only touch upon those debates briefly and relevant for this very ethnographic context. For example, in the anthropology of the state, more and more they perspective on affective state and the understanding that state-building and forming are based upon social practices and intersubjective experiences of affects (Navaro-Yashin 2002; 2009 Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015). Therefore, the state's imagination does not rely on physically-bounded and static entities such as territory and the population that inhabits it. Instead, it is conceived as an organic body entailing territorial relatedness and an imagined community evoked and experienced by collective affects. In other words, affects evoke the state as a diverse institutional body with its many parts organically merged.

In contrast, those affects are experienced and generated collectively in encounters in everyday life, related to particular circumstances. The authors Laszczkowski and Reeves (2015, 4) understand emotions as individually subjective experiences whereas affects "are an intersubjective (or, as some say, pre-subjective) intensity." Therefore, this approach focuses on emotions and sentiments outside cognitive recognition; other approaches, by contrast, position emotions as clearly determined results of cognitive socialization in the center of their research.

their intended effects. I further believe that the metaphor of managing continues to embody notions of leadership and control. This is especially the case when international interventions take action as a response to care and protection. Thus, they mediate interpretive authority of the international agency that guides audit culture and project management. In the following dialogue, the audit culture of projects and partnerships described above is materialized in terms of timespan, sustainability, and the effects of international agencies' agendas in the local setting. The outcome should ideally be quantifiable and predictable. Roger supports PCA's campaign on citizenship and nationality rights.

Roger: Sometimes, you cannot do things as a donor. You want something. If you believe in a process that it can work, this is the system. Sometimes it is impossible to avoid that the money goes into appointing someone very good at a ministry. Because everybody thinks she or he is right and brings changes. Nevertheless, then the UN pays her. In the case of PCA's campaign, how much is the process? How much is it a process to maintain a flame? To say, *voilà*, this is a contribution by civil society. How much are they connected and what pressure are they able to exert? This remains a question mark. They believe that through advocacy and activism, they can reach an impact. We had this discussion this morning. I think it is the role of embassies and others to go and see their counterparts in government and so on, and say, "Look, move things, can you just see things a bit differently?" Moreover, I think there is too much laziness in international community work. You tell them, you just give the money to civil society, and they do the job without a step further.

ME: So you would also criticize the practices of international development?

Roger: Me? I can, I do. What about you, Maria, you come a bit from that [international development].

Maria: I used to be in these settings before [UN agencies]. It is quite frustrating. Because things take much time. Agendas got changed based on foreign politics and people being in positions. Nevertheless, I do think that civil society needs to make some noise. They [PCA] keep making noise. It is important. However, again, we need to link that noise to structure, to policies. Nevertheless, this is a place where embassies can bring that noise into some meetings. If five ambassadors go and talk about the issue, you could change something. The noise has to keep going, coming from the ground. But not alone. They know that if they talk to the ambassador, he goes to the ministers and talks to them about the issue of the campaign. Furthermore, if another ambassador goes and talks to the ministers about the same issue, they say, "We have met with the women, we support their cause, and how can we help to get things moved if five ambassadors go and talk about the same issue."⁵⁴

One relevant point that emerges from the dialogue above is that interpretational autonomy is expected to be negotiated on the international scale. Projects already need to

⁵⁴ Fieldwork Interview transcript extract, June 14, 2017.

exist, work, and be able to sustain itself over the long term. In such cases, donors are reassured about the project's continued existence. A project's endurance predicts its durability. The donor, therefore, does not want to risk it unintentionally stopping and failing. Such conditions allow the project's direction to be controlled without the risk of intervening too much in domestic political affairs, since there are precedent references to the project's previous initiatives and trajectories. Roger also critiques international agencies, especially the UN, although he works for one. As I have observed during my fieldwork, UN agencies often receive criticism for self-sustaining organizational structures. Roger's interventionist purposes represent those of the international agency: they want to intervene but only limited and clearly defined ways. In the context of grassroots women's activism in Lebanon, Roger declares the following:

Do we have a problem with activism? No, we do not. If there are already social movements existing, we support advocacy and activist work. With women's issues, you are touching something beyond [...] common sense [...]. They were ready to take on anything, from torture to corruption, [they take any blame but not the blame about protection] but the blame on protecting women [...] no, they were not. [...] If activism [predates our] inner circles, we support [it].

With this, it is essential to highlight that the donor – in this case, Roger - is a foreign actor in the sense that he acts as an intervening force from outside. I use "outside" not just in the sense of geographic boundaries that define a state's territory, but also external institutional affiliation, meaning that there are no institutional connections to any form of state apparatus but only (international) relations. Such a perception entails a certain kind of authority, allowing Roger to act upon decisions made at the local level. His agency also determines mechanisms of managing, which means to govern and regulate designated projects.

Understanding how international aid operates through control mechanisms such as audit cultures and managerial tools is important, as is analyzing how concepts such as "capacity building" are constructed and employed within these frameworks. Although control regimes aim to regulate and legitimize aid through quantifiable indicators and bureaucratic procedures, the underlying processes of capacity development tend to be more intricate and multifaceted than these models suggest.

To unravel these dynamics, it is crucial to explore how concepts such as capacity building are enacted in practice, particularly through interventions such as workshops, which are key mediators between donor policies and local project implementation. This analysis reveals that, despite their apparent focus on long-term development, these tools frequently operate within a system characterized by economic indicators, managerial terminology, and normative standards. Consequently, understanding how capacity is built — and how this process is shaped by the power relations embedded in aid regimes — allows us to grasp the subtle ways in which global aid practices reproduce hierarchies and control, especially in marginalized contexts such as grassroots women's activism.

7.3.1 Accountability through Capacity Building and Log Frame⁵⁵

In the following section, I discuss how the managerial concept of "capacity building"⁵⁶ works in the context of international interventions and aid. In the following section, I discuss how the management concept of "capacity building" works in the context of international interventions and aid. I analyze the practical application of certain mechanisms, procedures and materiality, whether as a toolbox or as a controller for audit work. At the start of my fieldwork at PCA, I was puzzled by the business-oriented jargon in official documents, which aimed to define a project's purpose and expected results. Browsing through reports, funding proposals, and websites, it became clear that social development (in the sense of enhancing the conditions of people's everyday lives) is turned into bullet points and rectangular boxes containing graphic models. Each box is connected in order, by arrows that indicate the relationships, dependencies, and instructions for carrying out the process. Another format

⁵⁵ Log frame or frameworks is an abbreviated version of logical framework systems or approaches. It has been widely used and adapted to monitor, evaluate, and account for politics or economics and international development. Log frame constitutes an integral part of designing projects in international development and relations. A log frame concept can be found in the market economy and business; it seeks to simplify and model economic (market) reality. In my ethnographic context, a log frame acts a binding element between actors and materiality with several statuses and interests. I also participated in a log frame webinar during my internship at PCA (April 19 2016). Together with four PCA staff, we were trained on how to use and operate within the log frame. It constitutes a relevant tool for communicating with donors, and as such, it is becoming more visible to and attractive for donors. In that sense, log frame is a part of the capacity-building NGOs must perform to attract donors and speak in their language. Aside from its capacity-building component, log frame also represents a gateway to remaining connected within a transnational network, in order to share knowledge and information. It is useful not only for projects but also the processes of knowledge and capacity building.

⁵⁶ I introduced the concept of capacity building in the introductory chapter. However, this chapter deals with its empirical (and applied) practice in the context of international aid and humanitarianism.

uses numbers rather than bullet points. The terms used in the bullet points are carefully chosen and have are carefully chosen for their wide range of interpretations, dissemination, and uses, depending on the context. Cornwall's (2007) famous "buzz- or fuzzwords" are euphemisms subject to trends and phenomena that international developmental and relations' interests provide. Their content has shifted and been appropriated. Nevertheless, based on their origins and original meanings, I consider them deliberately chosen. They originate from a global capitalist system based on neoliberal market interests and regulations, where the labor force is governed according to its importance for production and work. These terms reveal the (de-)valuing of actions and goals. Log frames or framework operate as another model that describes goals and objects. For donors, a log frame serves as a tool for regulating and controlling the projects they intend to fund. However, this only works unidirectionally; that is, towards NGOs and their projects.

Mariana works for a Scandinavian organization that functions as a donor and primarily supports women's NGOs. When I asked her about the use and significance of log frame concepts, she remarked that a log frame always "refers back to your own indicators." With this, Mariana implied that log frames also serve to hold donors accountable because they sustain their long-term interest. In that sense, a log frame is also a form of authorization and legitimacy: it controls various project interests and monitors the work of the donors.

Log frames can always be traced back to their initial objectives; in this way, they are not solely unidirectional. From my own collaboration with a donor, I saw that log frames justify their adoption and continued use when they are approved at the highest levels of government. Log frame systems foster a great deal of creativity and analysis. After a project proposal is written, employees of international institutions use the log frame to track the project's progress. Log frames consist of small matrices designed to map project realities across different phases. They include goals, objects, and indicators aimed at guiding the implementation process. The purpose of these frameworks is to capture social processes. However, as they follow a wholly rational and linear logic, it is questionable how well they can reflect the complex realities of social life.

Log frames offer space for creativity and individual interests in project design. It is important to investigate the origins of this jargon and the reasons behind its vagueness—since it oscillates between deliberately using indeterminacy to create ambiguity and maintaining vagueness as a strategic tool. In this context, vagueness bestows power; the buzzword is no

longer just an "empty signifier", but a significant instrument for expressing authority. I would extend the concept of indeterminacy to legality (Schweitzer, 2015). The remaining opacity serves to include a wider range of possible scenarios, which also allows room for resistance—since a broad interpretation opens up multiple avenues for different understandings.

I got the impression that "Capacity Building" and its characteristics function largely as generalized buzzwords. I struggled to fully grasp its meaning on both macro- and micro-levels, which is why, as I mentioned in the introduction, I ultimately asked Rima. She did not hesitate to demonstrate her mastery of the term: "Capacity building is Capacity Building", she said, "Look it up in UN documents". With that, she shut down the topic. I followed her advice and found a brochure titled *Supporting Capacity Development: The UNDP Approach*.⁵⁷ The document served as a guide for establishing capacity by integrating social, institutional, and environmental visions—without excluding individual development. The brochure offered advice on embedding capacity building into funding proposals and project implementation, including formulating objectives and indicators aligned with a log frame system. The opening section listed principles that seemed key to understanding capacity building. I selected five principles that appeared especially relevant for my ethnographic analysis:

[The approach] measures capacity development systematically, using good-practice indicators, case evidence about capacity assets and needs, as well as the progress achieved. Capacity development building is a long-term process. It can be promoted through a combination of shorter-term results that are driven from the outside and more sustainable, longer-term ones that are driven from the inside. The UNDP approach links the enabling environment, organizations and individuals, and promotes a comprehensive approach across all three. It looks beyond individual skills and focuses on training to address broader questions of institutional change, leadership, empowerment and public participation (UNDP 2011 3).

The bureaucratic field that extends into transnational networks has its origins in an institutional setting founded and established within the UN framework. I contend that this bureaucratic apparatus was created by the UN and has been embedded within its structures, including institutional bodies, policy guidelines, and document formats. Beyond these principles, capacity building involves key concepts such as knowledge, leadership, institutional organization, and accountability. These elements highlight what is fundamental for capacity development: the production, translation, and dissemination of knowledge through

⁵⁷ See UNDP 2011.

education; the cultivation of leadership as the development of authority capable of shaping and changing processes; and the establishment of institutional arrangements, organizational structures, public relations, and transparency measures necessary to make the work visible and accessible.

Timeframes, spatiality, external interventions, and awareness campaigns serve as critical markers for project implementation, as well as for monitoring progress toward project goals. These markers will be elaborated in subsequent sections. Capacity building, or capacity development, is an institutional process that varies over time and space, capable of operating at both individual and community levels. It is a procedural undertaking, where the ability to generate and accumulate valuable knowledge is transformed into a negotiation of power—leading to project improvement and increased continuity. The evolution of this capacity should, ultimately, influence public life and societal order.

As previously noted, the concept of capacity building is articulated within a managerial, capitalist jargon. Work and value creation are used to monitor and reflect economic worth through labor. I suggest that all measurements and indicators are based on economic markers devised by liberal market interests. International organizations, including UN agencies, employ these metrics to assess developments in specific sectors, interests, and categories. States commit to tracking reports and policy documents, implying that capacity building is also understood in economic terms: as development that seeks profit and aligns with market imperatives, with improvements in capacity being linked to the long-term sustainability of projects.

In this context—particularly within the liberalized, market-oriented, NGO-institutionalized landscape—the prevailing understanding of capacity is rooted in metrics that emphasize continuity and sustainability as key outcomes. The capacity itself is envisioned as a skill or ability that should be strengthened through project activities. The long-term aim is for the capacity to contribute to the political economy of the state where the NGO operates. For example, Hatem, working at PCA, supports a project encouraging cooperatives among rural women, which I referenced in the introduction. He considers sustainability embodied in self-standing cooperatives integrated into state institutions. He compares capacity to a body: " [The ability] is to build financial skills and muscles to find renewable income sources, such as cooperatives. We are still NGOs but more in a company-like, self-sustainable structure."

By cooperatives, Hatem means the Cooperative Union, which now runs a catering business and a food and pastry shop. This cooperative and its association can be an example of translating a vision into practice: it is not only about economic resources, but also about the formation of a cooperative in general and a women's cooperative in particular, whose practical implementation is a counterproposal to neoliberal capitalism. However, it should not be forgotten that the formation of cooperatives is an established international development approach from the 1980s as I was told by many of my informants, which plays into a market-oriented logic. The cooperatives are self-sustaining on the one hand, but on the other hand they are dependent on partnerships, orders and financing coming from NGOs and their environment.

It becomes clear how a project is contextualized and framed on several levels: through its content and relationships with actors and different scales. Having dealt with capacity, I will further examine project management in international development. Before discussing tools, discussing the tools donors use to monitor projects, I pose the question. The question is instead: how is capacity building itself built? The logical answer seems to be that it is built through education and training. The excellent concept (and term) for training and development combined with capacity building is *workshop*. The workshop is an invaluable category within log frameworks and funding proposals. The purpose of a workshop is that capacity and knowledge are built through teaching, according to a determined stock of knowledge and paired with objectives related to social spheres and habits. Workshop activities are to occur in a given framework of time and space established by the project. Anthropologists Ann Swidler and Ann Watkins (2009) showed in their article how NGOs in Malawi seek to teach anglers "how to fish" according to NGOs' needs that they indicate and knowledge they consider standard. "Teaching a man to fish" also shows that the tone of these educational measures is one associated with dependency and control. One could give them resources or fishing equipment, after all. This article contextualizes and conceptualizes capacity building and workshops in international development and project management according to the relationship between donors and NGOs. The two authors further demonstrate how capacity building is taught and applied in practice; that is, in workshops and trainings. Maria is Lebanese and works with Roger in an international institution. Her subsequent statement however contradicts what has been said above about capacity building taught in workshops and trainings:

Let us build capacity and hope to stay on. Facilitate a workshop, and everything is beautiful, and there is food, A.C. [air conditioner], and we talk about our own experiences and ideas about peacebuilding in our lives, and then we leave and see you later. We do not follow up with organizations who want to have training. They do not want that.

Maria explained to me during an interview that "'peacebuilding' is a long-lasting, effective aim. It is not only doing workshops and bringing together and leave them in the hope that thing is going to be changed, but things are also going to be moved." Maria considers her work an impetus for progress. "We push for advocacy; we push for change with our limited budget. [...] [Because it] does not cost much to bring women together, to plan what they want to do, how they want to organize, mobilize, lobby." It seems that international actors provide an organizational framework that facilitates the right conditions, at least as long as the budget allows it. Women will take over and do it on their own. International actors expect women to go to the streets and make themselves and their claims visible. They should make an impact and create new public discourse and debate. Grassroots women's rights activism is tolerated within certain constraints. The *raisons d'être* of international institutions shapes these limitations, using their status and power to act and intervene. These institutions thwart themselves and women's activist by not using all their power, though, given the benefits to them within the political economy, this restraint is probably predictable. They criticize the developmental and international aid dependences (which are materialized in the form of workshops and training) that they themselves have created.

On the basis of the discussion of log frames as a core tool for project management and accountability, a wide range of instruments and practices are used to implement the principles of good governance and partnership in international aid. Although log frames are used to define, monitor and justify project goals, they are just one element of a wider toolkit designed to structure, evaluate and legitimize cooperative relationships. This section explores how these tools function in practice, how they influence accountability norms and standards, and how they contribute to the formation of "good partnerships" — conceptualized here as collaborative relationships based on transparency, efficiency, and shared success criteria.

7.3.2 Instruments and Good Partnership

The concept of a "tool kit"⁵⁸ is widely used among international aid institutions, project managers, and practitioners. Here, it refers to the instruments and methods employed to implement or "make work" a given concept or framework. Tools represent the tangible equipment that individuals need to perform their tasks—material tools like a hammer or other implements required by artisans in their daily work. Similarly, operators in international aid—who possess expertise in development, humanitarian, or political matters—also require manufactured tool kits, which they often refer to explicitly by that term. This signifies their adherence to a concept with a defined vision or set of specific requirements.

So, what do these tool kits for fostering a good partnership look like? I have coined the term "good partnership" based on the broader concept of "good practice", frequently used in international relations regarding cooperation and resource transfer. Established and popularized by entities such as UNDP and also employed by organizations like OECD-DAC, the World Bank, WEF (or IMF), Oxfam, and Western foreign ministries such as USAID, DFID, SIDA, or CIDA, good governance aims to achieve development goals through the establishment of institutional characteristics and values such as transparency, efficiency, participation, responsibility, the rule of law, democracy, justice, and a liberal market orientation.⁵⁹

In practice, these actors deploy various tools to reach project objectives. For example, in my empirical cases, experts often relied on physical documents such as reports and action plans. Furthermore, recommendations are sometimes articulated through soft laws—non-binding legal documents or policy frameworks. Although conventions of good governance tend to be policy-oriented and less binding than law, bilateral agreements can emerge from them, providing a degree of credibility and a sense of obligation, as if they were binding legal commitments. Law, in this context, becomes saturated with social, political, and normative meanings. Development thus becomes an intrinsic element of lawmaking and policy creation.

But what specific tools does a donor employ to build a good partnership rooted in governance principles and shared values? I consider a successful partnership to be an expression of good governance practice. When a partnership operates effectively within its

⁵⁸ This is based on fieldwork information from Margot, who works for an international organization. This person gave me the information about tool kits I utilize in this section to further ethnographic analysis. Fieldwork notes, May 22, 2017.

⁵⁹ For further information, see the literature of the United Nations, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Towards%20Human%20Resilience/Towards_SustainingMDGProgress_Ch8.pdf.

conditionalities and functions, it can be regarded as a good one—worthy of further development and promotion.

What do these tools look like in practice? The following section presents several empirical examples. The term "tool kit" is managerial jargon; some instruments are not accessible to the public. Typically, a sequence of planning, action, and evaluation—"plan, do, check"—dictates which legal documents or contracts are needed. The plan serves as a control mechanism, the action as the implementation phase, and the check as the audit process. Overall, reports are the tangible results of applying various tools; they lend transparency and accountability to the partnership and the measurement of progress through quantifiable indicators.

For instance, Melina, who works for a donor agency, explained that her institution avoids requesting interim reports to reduce the workload for NGOs, instead requiring only annual reports. Such responsive reporting mechanisms aim to ensure accountability through numerical evidence, facilitating the authorization and continuation of projects. She also mentioned that some research on tools and indicators in international politics has been commissioned by larger organizations, which sample, collect, and provide surveys—though these tools are often not publicly accessible. Indicators function as measurable criteria and benchmarks for assessing progress.

Increasing awareness of gender issues and gender-sensitive indicators has become common in international relations, especially in project implementation and evaluation. For example, the EU Gender Action Plan requires that at least 85% of all development projects—according to the latest scores—should meet gender marker standards (the annex initially referred to 75%)⁶⁰. A former employee of the Canadian government involved in foreign affairs emphasized that, for Canada and other nations, it is crucial to focus not only on indicators but on gender-responsive results. Previously, CIDA provided online tools such as gender analysis templates to support this approach.

⁶⁰ More general information on the OECD-DAC gender marker can be found on the OECD-DAC website: <https://www.oecd.org/derec/adb/tool-kit-gender-equality-results-indicators.pdf>.

Narrative of a Good Partnership Practice: A Scandinavian Model

This section presents an empirical example illustrating what effective partnership between a donor and an NGO can look like within the context of the discussed accountability framework and power dynamics. The example also demonstrates how concepts such as time, efficiency, and sustainability are projected onto practice and made visible.

Saskia, an employee of a Scandinavian INGO based in a Scandinavian capital, exemplifies this approach. She resides and works in Lebanon, responsible for managing her organization's partner projects. Her professional title is Field Representative. In this context, the international NGO functions as a donor.

Contrasting with Roger's assertion that confidence must be earned before establishing a new program or partnership, Saskia considers trust a pre-existing condition—an assumption that arises before project initiation. Of course, before implementation, both sides need to be familiar with each other's work and reputation, often through their mutual professional networks and relationships. Personal ties between executive directors and project managers on both sides also play a crucial role. These indicators are evaluated during decision-making, leading to an agreed partnership.

However, discrepancies in understandings of ethics or what constitutes a true partnership can sometimes arise. Saskia's trust heavily relies on social relationships, and she values the expertise and objectives of her partners equally. She regards the practice of good governance as essential, emphasizing participation, agency, responsibility, and empowerment within the NGO sector:

In general, we do not just fund projects, we are trying to find long-term relationships with organizations, and it might take some time before we sign an agreement. [...] Not always, but we aim to stay in for quite some years. That is because our aim is that it should not just be project-based and then the project is over, and then you have to find something that is trendy and donor-oriented now.

In contrast, Roger is hesitant to engage with new partners or programs. He prefers projects that have already been piloted, seeking reassurance that the partnership and his decision pose no risks to his work, social standing, or reputation. Saskia's organization was established in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the Balkan War. Its name, which translates as "women for women", originated from the involvement of only women when reaching out for partners. The NGO's overall aim is to empower women in conflict or post-conflict societies.

Initially, the organization operated as an emergency humanitarian actor providing basic needs. Over time, Saskia explains, it started reflecting on gender inequality, especially in light of the unchecked rapes that occurred during the Balkan Wars. She emphasizes that women's empowerment should not be marginalized or treated as secondary issues. She urges that women's issues be regarded as equally relevant within social discourses and policy.

Saskia shares an example of her own experience: a grassroots organization approached her for a women's rights project grant. The organization consisted of six men and one woman—a secretary—whose idea of empowerment was supporting women in selling handicrafts. Saskia considers such approaches outdated; her organization now prioritizes projects that advance sustainable development and emancipation—projects that genuinely promote gender equality and social change.

She also highlights the challenging position NGOs face within the donor–NGO relationship, especially in terms of funding procedures. According to the executive director of PCA, the nonprofit sector—like any other business—contains rivalries and competition. Saskia continues:

I see it as a problem [funding procedure] since everything people [local NGOs] need comes down to funds to run their projects or turns into a competition for funds. They are aiming towards the same direction because, of course, there is a plethora of different funders in the world. But it is not that easy. I mean, there are few big ones [famous donors] that everyone knows about. You can spend a month just reading on different private foundation [and their background and funding requirements] [and then you find out] that they are interested in funding only a certain amount. But the more donors you have, the more times it takes to write reports for each and you cannot provide it because you don't have the resources to absorb it due to the administration [and organization of the NGO].

This example demonstrates that a genuinely good partnership, as envisioned in the Scandinavian model, encompasses more than just formal planning, monitoring and evaluation processes. It embodies a strong sense of mutual respect, trust and equality — values that are not only embedded in the concept of good partnership practices but also reflected in daily interactions and collaborative decision-making.

The concept of a good partnership thus serves as a guiding principle and an exemplary standard in practice. When collaboration is grounded in equality and shared responsibility, it becomes a powerful model, demonstrating how commitment to these principles can foster

authentic cooperation and enduring relationships. Thus, the Scandinavian approach is not merely theoretical, but provides a practical blueprint for collaboration, demonstrating how the principles of good partnerships can be realized and maintained in everyday work.

7.4 Shifts and Interventional Responsiveness from International Aid

This section deals with the practical and empirical application of courses of action in response to externally imposed changes. It shows how actors respond to primarily developmental changes that aim to implement a humanitarian shift. Such shifts affect both local and international actors. In the case of the latter, I demonstrate the extent to which their international agency is impacted.

In concrete terms, I provide two examples. The first example concerns the strategy of INGOs and how they manage their humanitarian operations and approaches in local contexts. The second example illustrates how local actors react to humanitarian changes in order to continue pursuing their project visions and addressing their issues.

7.4.1 The "Do No Harm" Strategy of INGOS

"I am quite pragmatic; I will not have a large meta-theory about the aid sector and human rights frameworks. I think about how we can design and implement factual programming without harming, grounded as much as possible in local needs and priorities. I am very critical of the humanitarian sector and system or 'business', and there are still significant gaps there about agency, voice, how we reflect on our programs and revise models that do not work. " For Miro, an employee and representative of an international organization, both neutrality and pragmatism are essential entry points for action. As the quote above suggests, Miro prefers to avoid being associated with broader ideological frameworks that might create conflicts of interest or jeopardize their intervention work. Instead, the emphasis is on pragmatic, fact-based approaches.

Local NGOs receive funding in exchange for delivering services through grassroots projects. These grassroots actors are usually responsible for a largely homogenous target group, with whom they implement project goals. In return, they are held accountable by donors to justify the use of funds and expenses. As seen, the flow of money and its strategic investment are highly significant for donors. International institutions tend to view humanitarian interventions as neutral, immediate assistance—avoiding excessive political involvement (Ticktin 2011: 257–259). The same applies to donors engaged in diplomatic relationships with the host state; they prefer to operate within a "safe space" and only engage with high-strategic boundaries and risk limitations.

Women's NGOs and grassroots organizations are among those most affected by funding restrictions and harm minimization strategies. These strategies influence their institutional practices and directly shape their social engagement and project implementation. Funding, therefore, has a strong link to economic concerns: domestic economic strategies must be adapted within the broader context of restrictions, restructuring measures, project durations, and conditions imposed by donors.

RIPE's executive director, Ahmed, expresses skepticism toward the claimed efficiency of project designs as measured by management tools and audits. He argues that most projects have durations that are too short to truly ensure continuity, assess impacts, and translate outcomes into meaningful, quantifiable data. He states, "I do not believe in this efficiency after one year. Great for their records but not great for our society. It is more difficult to handle, assess, and evaluate a long-term approach. Most of the grants are limited to 1-2 years." Ahmed questions the value of relying solely on quantifiable metrics in evaluation processes. In his view, qualitative assessment methods are more significant—they better capture the sustainability of social change that the projects aim to achieve. Eli, a project manager at a prominent women's NGO in northern Lebanon, shares that conflicts often arise with funders because the NGO resists adopting the strictly formalized approach that funders prefer. He explains, "Their approach is more formalized, more straightforward, which is not the case in our approach. Our approach is rather diffuse; we believe in long processes. Their approach does not work, anyway."

Furthermore, the idea behind many projects is often linked to their economic context. International aid and intervention are, in essence, a business—primarily one rooted in development and humanitarian assistance. The historical development of this sector as a

stable economic pillar can be traced to its marriage with neoliberal market logic, which prioritizes efficiency, competition, and strategic interests. Ahmed adds to this discussion:

Business background is a need, a need for proving what the money was spent for. You need to be able to explain the world in the easiest way how you spent the money and what for. On the other side, there is a dilemma: we are not dealing with businesses here but rather with long-term developments. So there is not always time for doing a perfect baseline, especially when you have ties to emergency cases where a quick reaction is necessary and needed.

7.4.2 The Narrative of Dealing "With Own Issues First"

This section examines the significant influence of international interventions on the work of women's NGOs and their agendas concerning women's issues. The sentiment "We want to deal first with our own issues" has been articulated strikingly often when talking about international interventions and responsiveness interventions in practice and the responses to them on the ground. Women's NGOs give this reply in response to questions about how to prioritize women's issues and tackle women's rights, including heterogeneous activism and its various notions, approaches, and political perspectives.

This section disproves the idea that women's NGOs do primarily mean with "dealing with *its* own"—that is, a nationalistic argument that women's matters are exclusively linked to nationality (or a territorially-bounded national setting) without consideration of historical and political developments. I argue that such an argument is widely used by political parties and in Lebanon's public discourse. However, connection to a state context (in the sense of territory and domestic laws and politics) impacts women's rights and their vernacularized projections. It creates a space that people move to and seek unity within, trying to create an identity they can relate and belong to. The specific characteristics of the Lebanese legal context are highly particular, as I have shown throughout previous chapters. However, Lebanon's context, foreign politics, and women's rights issues necessitate seeing how women's freedoms have shrunk due to war and a violent past.

Moreover, negotiations over women's rights currently deal with an economic crisis worsened by migration from war-torn neighboring Syria and increased violent turmoil in the region. Another influence is the growth of conservative and radical forces which aim to maintain their power at the expense of women's rights. As Heba, an NGO worker, put it, "Not

everything is because of the Syrians. " She continued that the "crisis" shows the symptoms of the weaknesses Lebanon as a country is dealing with. It has emerged that Lebanon's state cannot deal with diversity and crisis, whether it is the Syrian occupation and crisis or the Syrian occupation.

International aid and interventions are inherently shaped by contingencies and often unpredictable relationships between politics, organizations, and institutions. Ahmed observed that shifts in focus are often rebranded as "Syria-related issues", but the core challenges remain the same. Managing these challenges requires similar structural and managerial approaches. Ahmed emphasized that "the main problem is to extract the object of action from its context."

Therefore, the analysis indicates that international development is inherently marked by volatility, contingency, relationality, and the agency of individual actors. These processes tend to depoliticize the challenges NGOs face and are tasked with addressing—or even ignoring—they. The earlier sections demonstrated how NGOs strive to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects amid shifting donor agendas. Their responsiveness reveals the adaptability, flexibility, and resilience necessary to maintain project continuity in a changing political landscape.

NGOs organize themselves to respond to such shifts, especially as projects increasingly prioritize issues related to the conflict in Syria. The ongoing migration from Syria influences Lebanon's social and political dynamics, and the state and society react in ways typical of an already fragile and stagnating political economy heavily dependent on international aid. NGOs adapt their projects to address the rising Syrian refugee population, linking them to global humanitarian efforts and interventionist policies.

An example is Eli, a project manager at a women's NGO, who reported that donors instructed her organization to either shift focus to "Syria-related issues" or include quotas for Syrian participants in proposals and reports. This move aims to demonstrate responsiveness to new international priorities. In intervention logic, officially allocating budget resources or mentioning a "Syria focus"—especially within humanitarian aid—creates clear accountability and enhances project credibility aligned with global policy agendas.

However, "Syria-related issues" is an ambiguous term that NGOs must navigate. The requirement to set quotas for Syrian women means projects not originally focused on this group are increasingly framed around "Syria". Eli's NGO refused to accept such quotas,

emphasizing their principle of providing accessible, inclusive services to all women, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Due to its reputation for reliability at both local and international levels, the NGO can afford to reject these shifting demands without risking funding or existence.

Nevertheless, many donors have recognized that implementing such quotas creates tensions within Lebanese communities. Local citizens often feel that aid is contingent upon Syrian refugees, which fuels xenophobia and social fragmentation. Ahmed added that "when considering the context, we have to think about Syrians in Lebanon, not just Syrians." What exactly he means by this remains unclear, but it likely refers to the need for societal change that benefits everyone, regardless of project-specific quotas.

This analysis highlights how the refrain of "dealing with our own issues first" is more than just a rhetorical statement; it reflects a complex negotiation process that NGO actors perform within a highly volatile and politicized environment. While on the surface it appears as a localization of priorities, in reality, this stance is deeply embedded in broader, often contradictory, political, economic, and international logics that influence how women's NGOs operate on the ground.

This chapter has demonstrated how international actors justify their *raison d'être* within partnerships and collaborations with local NGOs in Lebanon, particularly in the context of women's rights and political and humanitarian interventions. The conceptual framework employed is the moral and affective economy, which helps to conceptualize international agency. The chapter also illustrated how tools and methods from the audit culture of international actors are operationalized by local NGOs. Furthermore, it revealed how local actors negotiate and translate abstract guidelines and policies—embedded within international law and treaties—into measurable project content through various instruments. An additional insight is that humanitarian and development approaches increasingly intersect at the local level, especially regarding women's empowerment and rights. An ethnographic example of a rights-based women's project illustrates how these humanitarian shifts are put into practice and how NGOs adapt tools and instruments into concrete actions.

This is the final chapter of the dissertation, which focuses on legal transformations, women's activism in political and public spaces, and the work of women's NGOs at both transnational and grassroots levels. It summarizes the key findings and offers concluding reflections on the work.

8. Conclusion

In this dissertation, the narrative begins with an exploration of legality and women's rights in Lebanon. From there, it expands into the realms of international development policy, gender discourse, and the global aid industry. My ethnographic research started at a local NGO in Beirut, with the aim of understanding what daily life in NGOs actually looks like. I learned that, on a day-to-day basis, women's NGOs primarily focus on project implementation, activism, and organizational management—operating within the framework of international humanitarian and development initiatives and driven by the input and requirements of donors. A particular focus of interest was women's NGOs' work on legal transformation—encompassing processes of translation, adaptation, and the accommodation of notions of women's rights, while also questioning the universality of human rights and moral standards.

In today's context, women's NGOs are increasingly seen as politically relevant actors at both the international and local levels. Their influence on political discourse and the public sphere is indispensable, especially in a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world.

Women's rights activists actively demand and influence the development of new legal reforms through their work and advocacy. They also aspire to broader social change that impacts society as a whole, including structural transformations of the political and legal systems. Thus, women's rights activists are not merely legal reformers or supporters of new legal frameworks; they also contribute to shaping new forms of governance and statehood.

Women's NGOs operate across local, international, and transnational levels. They both mediate and embody knowledge and expertise, negotiating these with donors and their selected partners on the ground, who are involved in project implementation and promotion. At the local level, their efforts in legal transformation increase their visibility in politics; at the national level, they become more prominent in the public sphere. They advocate for gender equality, legal reforms, and the abolition of laws that sustain gender injustice and hinder the advancement of women's rights. Consequently, they engage directly in the legal and political processes of lawmaking and policymaking as expert actors allied with political parties. Their work on legal transformation thus expresses and substantiates their political claims.

Campaign work by women's NGOs is primarily advocacy-driven, aimed at reshaping Lebanon's legal pluralism to favor greater gender equality and the empowerment of women's rights. Documenting their activities serves as an effective means of capturing and evaluating their outcomes and goals. This process allows for continuous refinement of projects, bringing

them closer to, or even beyond, their original vision. The institutionalized women's rights activism practiced by local NGOs seeks to address women's issues in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the diverse needs of all women. Their aim is to create a unifying element that bridges societal divides based on ethnicity, religion, class, gender, and age. Through their work, women's NGOs advocate for women's rights as a way to produce tangible social change. For some activists, these rights encompass social and economic dimensions, with their importance depending on intersectional perspectives. The projects therefore embed these rights as core objectives. Consequently, women's NGOs function as significant political actors, shaping discourse and influencing social and political spheres.

At the grassroots level, women's rights activist groups seek to enhance their visibility through public actions, often taking to the streets. In creating these spaces, women's rights activism increasingly strives to be intersectional, inclusive, and diverse, aiming to transcend generational, thematic, and legal differences. As demonstrated in chapter 5, these efforts actively attempt to incorporate and bridge such divides, fostering a more unified and representative movement.

Institutional visibility is crucial for advancing women's rights activism, as it fosters the emergence and professionalization of NGOs. However, as shown in chapter 3, this process can also create divisions within the movement. On the ground, women's NGOs and activist groups actively work to bridge these gaps, striving for greater cohesion despite institutional challenges. In addition, visibility remains vital in the political landscape of public discourse on women's rights, women's roles, and gender equality. This visibility is often achieved through campaign work, which NGO activism emphasizes as a means of influencing policy. By amplifying their claims through campaigns, NGOs make their relevance clear to institutional actors. In doing so, they work to translate activism into political action—contributing to legal transformation and shaping legislation, effectively linking grassroots advocacy with formal lawmaking processes.

Claiming space for the visibility of women's rights activism and women's NGOs is thus highly relevant. Spatial dimensions of social action and development are a core focus of this dissertation. Beirut serves as a hub for humanitarian and development work, as well as local and regional grassroots activism. The city was divided during the civil war, and these divisions still manifest today in the sectarian segmentation of districts in the postwar period.

To examine and contextualize colonialism—both historical and contemporary—in the urban fabric, I developed a map of international organizations relevant to my research. This map appears in chapter 4, which focuses on women's NGO work. The remnants of past political and legal traditions, as well as economic dependencies, continue to be visible in Lebanon's legal and political institutions, as well as in the landscape of international aid work.

The NGO work regarded as activism and struggle represents a projection of an imagined, ethical goal. It goes beyond the mere implementation of projects or objectives; it also involves institutionalized ethical practice. In collaboration with grassroots activist groups, NGOs, and other organizations—often lacking the formal features of NGOs—women's NGOs seek to realize and embody their vision through their institutional work. This effort aims to promote inclusivity and nonsectarianism, deliberately avoiding support for the sectarian political system and instead working towards social change through cooperation. The map referenced earlier, showing the locations of women's NGOs, INGOs, and other international institutions, reflects how these organizations are situated within the city's historic layout. These spatial and institutional continuities have influenced Lebanon's current legal structures and serve as the foundation for development policies that are anchored in the existing sociopolitical landscape.

Women's NGOs' efforts toward legal transformation necessitate funding, which is primarily generated through project work. These projects follow their own methodology, with processes, thematic focuses, and content carefully documented and aligned with clearly defined, measurable goals and outcomes to attract potential donors. Project documentation also includes detailed expense tracking and budgeting. During meetings, donors and recipients negotiate matters related to funding, where they perform their respective roles—discussing the project's content and financial arrangements, as detailed in chapter 6. Such negotiations often reveal relationships of asymmetrical dependency shaped by accountability and priorities.

As I have emphasized several times, Beirut remains a hub of international aid and political influence. Women's NGOs working on legal transformation, therefore, must navigate not only project funding and donor-donee dependencies but also interactions with international actors, whose *raison d'être* and influence extend to their global agency and authority within local project contexts. As shown in chapter 8, these NGOs are compelled to

respond to shifts in international aid agendas and political discourses—often by adjusting project priorities toward a humanitarian perspective.

Consequently, modifications in project implementation—such as changes in topics, venues, design, or target groups—become necessary to secure ongoing funding, support, and partnerships from international institutions. This adaptation process occurs with the understanding that the humanitarian and developmental imperatives of international authority and its agencies will continue to influence and shape their work.

This thesis critically examines feminist politics alongside mainstream gender practices within developmental and humanitarian NGO work, as well as women's rights activism at grassroots, national decision-making, and international/local negotiation levels. Based on the ethnographic findings, it can be argued that structure both shapes practices and is simultaneously shaped by them—creating a dynamic interplay where practices follow structures, structures inform practices, and both reinforce one another. This ongoing process reflects multiple layers of agency within the structure and highlights the complex roles and identities that emerge as a result.

Furthermore, this relationship is not limited to social practices alone but extends to legal realms as well. Rights and legal reforms are not merely codified in constitutions or legal precedents; they are part of a societal process actively reinforced and underscored by NGOs' work and vision, shaping rights as part of a broader societal transformation.

An additional point is that, beyond the legal practices that organize women's NGOs' daily routines, the process itself is dynamic and non-linear. Women's work unfolds in a wave-like pattern rather than a straight line: project activities such as meetings, events, and workshops are designed to be discreet and time-sensitive, with outcomes that must be achieved and documented quickly to justify ongoing funding. Although projects are often seen as complete only at their official end, the work process remains fluid—projects may be interrupted or placed on hold due to funding shortages or shifting priorities. Women's NGOs—and their projects—must continuously adapt their topics, methods, and organizational strategies in response to changing international politics and policies, especially in the context of the humanitarian paradigm shift.

This ongoing evolution exemplifies a feminist process rooted in self-empowerment: NGOs pursue visions of social change and progress through diversity and inclusion, often stretching and rethinking existing institutional structures. Ultimately, their advocacy for

vernacularized, secular civil law aims to create legal frameworks that reflect these feminist ideals while remaining adaptable to societal shifts.

My research has demonstrated that women's rights activism and the visions of women's NGOs aim to craft a new form of statecraft—a reimagined, progressive statehood that fosters changes within the legal and political systems. Central to this effort is the push for a vernacularized, unified family law in the form of civil law. I argue that this process of secularization envisions a lesser religion—an alternative constitutional framework that accommodates legal pluralism and family regulation within Lebanon's existing sectarian system.

This secularized approach regards women as legal subjects, regardless of their sectarian affiliation. Law is fundamentally based on normativity—systems of norms and values, whether religious, cultural, or social, continuously influence and justify legal standards. Women's NGOs seek to transform these normative frameworks by promoting laws grounded in equality and social justice. Such a law would reflect a new conception of humanity—one inclusive and unified—where diversity and heterogeneity are embraced but do not determine legal outcomes.

In this vision, equality before the law means applying a uniform legal standard accessible to all women. Women's NGOs are actively working to develop a secularized family law that aligns with these principles. They craft vernacularized legal reforms through their institutional efforts and activities. Importantly, civil law does not necessarily have to supplant religious law; instead, both could coexist within a plural legal framework. For instance, marriage within Islamic or Christian institutions—recognized by courts or religious authorities—could be acknowledged as legal under a civil framework, similar to models in the UK regarding Sharia law.

These negotiations and divisions of responsibility should be formalized through agreements and mechanisms for legal dispute resolution. A cooperative relationship between the state and religious institutions must be developed, with the ultimate authority remaining with the state and its civil institutions. The state's courts and legal bodies should monitor religious institutions, possibly through umbrella organizations or specialized working groups. All legal documents—contracts, treaties, or agreements—must reflect this binational or

multireligious framework, raising questions about the extent to which religious institutions are integrated into state structures.⁶¹

Such thoughts about potential compatibility and adjustments to religious and civil law consider only the bureaucratic legal and organizational aspects of the institutionalization of religious rights. Religious *rights*, that is—I use the plural as there are an equivalent coexistence and pluralism of the officially recognized sects.

Such considerations about potential compatibility and adjustments between religious and civil law primarily address the bureaucratic, legal, and organizational aspects of institutionalizing religious rights. It is important to note that "religious rights" is used in the plural, reflecting the coexistence and pluralism among Lebanon's recognized sects.

However, based on my analysis of interviews, public statements, and organizational documents, it becomes clear that women's NGOs and their women's rights activism regard the responsibility and authority for family law as emerging from within these organizations themselves. They position themselves as the internal anchors—experts who synthesize and carry forward both local realities and global discourses on women's rights, emancipation, and transnational cooperation across multiple levels. Their authority is not externally given; it is cultivated internally through their knowledge, experience, and strategic projection.

These organizations do not see responsibility defined solely by sectarian or gender boundaries but as a self-originating force, aiming to develop a new, secular, and locally adapted version of civil law. This law is envisioned not merely as reform but as the creation of an institutional universality—a framework grounded in principles of equality and social justice, responsive to Lebanon's social and cultural context.

Crucially, these women's NGOs, while engaged externally in advocacy and project implementation, see themselves as the primary source of internal authority and legitimacy. They are the core from which global discourses—on women's rights, empowerment and transnational cooperation—are interpreted, adapted, and projected onto local realities. This internal origin of influence ensures they are the self-empowered origin points of legal and social transformation, shaping the future direction of family law and social policy from within their own expertise and organizational strength.

⁶¹ See the example of Turkey, elaborated on by sociologist Hikmet Kocamaner in 2019, in which religious authorities such as imams were transformed into state employees—that is, civil servants.

This internal legitimacy and authority become particularly significant in Lebanon's complex socio-political landscape. As international actors intervene increasingly in local affairs, the role of women's NGOs as self-empowered architects of legal reform becomes even more crucial. Their capacity to synthesize and project both global discourses and local realities positions them as key actors in shaping the future of family law and social policy in Lebanon.

This research project examined the constitutive role and underlying doctrines of international law within local contexts. This study critically analyzes the practices, theories, and politics of international aid, with particular attention to Western approaches to development and humanitarianism in both international relations and postwar societies. It also investigates the less politicized shift towards humanitarianism in women's rights as it manifests in empirical practice. The processes of internationalization involve the increasing intervention of international actors in local conditions. Lebanon occupies a unique position in the Middle East and among regional stakeholders. International aid actors engage in local events because these have far-reaching consequences for the wider region and significantly influence global and international political dynamics.

These actors, including international institutions and foreign embassies, shoulder responsibilities similar to those of NGOs. Their roles encompass producing and disseminating institutional knowledge, developing visionary ideas, negotiating representation, and maintaining legitimacy and interpretative sovereignty through their work and presence in the field. Although they engage in project activities related to legal transformation—albeit with different aspects of accountability and legitimacy—their responsibilities differ in execution.

While grassroots activists operate directly on the street as their stage, women's NGOs work across local, transnational, and international levels, as well as within the national political and legal landscapes. I argue that public practice holds potential for action on multiple scales—through the legal work of mobilization, lobbying, networking, and awareness-raising. All activities falling under these categories constitute the work of rights and law projects, which influence rights legislation and lawmaking processes through collective mobilization.

In my analysis, I also examined how the negotiation of women's rights and their opposites occurs within the context of "depoliticization" (Ferguson 1990) through international aid. I argue that international actors exercise authority and influence primarily to serve their own interests, with the power differential between them and local agents made visible through their agency and authority. The legitimacy derived from legal and economic

independence enables these actors to intervene in local politics. However, the limitations of international agencies become evident in their collaborations and partnerships with local actors.

Women's NGOs reinforce their interpretive authority and agency through their work, especially via the mediation process of international law and women's rights—what I refer to as projection. They utilize international policies and frameworks related to women's issues in ways that fill gaps and respond to transnational developments. Sometimes, women's rights need to be *created*—as they already exist but require implementation and awareness-raising—especially when they are overlooked, diluted, or depoliticized.

Broadly speaking, women's rights and empowerment are invoked as keywords or buzzwords that, when adapted locally, result in calls for legal change—particularly regarding marriage and citizenship—that frame these issues as health and family concerns. These topics are based on universal, gender-neutral ideas (relevant to both sexes), yet their framing and implementation are often influenced by local, social, and political contexts.

The research aims to challenge and move beyond the oversimplified representations of women in development and humanitarian projects as a homogeneous, victimized minority within society. The language and discourse surrounding women's rights often express ideas in an ambiguous and indeterminate manner (Schweitzer 2015). Such broad generalizations can serve as powerful tools—filling gaps through projection—and even widely circulated buzzwords (Cornwall 2015) tend to be deliberately vague, with unclear agendas and functions. This vagueness allows for flexibility and creative interpretation but also risks concealing and perpetuating power imbalances that remain unchallenged.

In this context, it becomes increasingly necessary to analyze international aid and its practices within local settings—against the backdrop of an entangled nexus of human rights, development, and international humanitarianism. My ethnographic data clearly show that these concepts are often blurred in practice: difficult to distinguish, and frequently used interchangeably, especially amid the ongoing shift toward humanitarian intervention. Therefore, I argue that these ideas should not be examined in isolation—neither in theory nor in practice. Instead, they are already deeply intertwined, as my empirical evidence reveals.

A feminist analytical framework then critically challenges these hegemonic narratives—embedded in the East-West dichotomy—that portray Arab women as victims, passive, and deprived of rights and empowerment, implying that they require external

assistance to improve their living standards. This approach exposes how outdated discourses surrounding humanitarianism and development reinforce the misconception that solutions are unidirectional. Moreover, it dismantles the notion that women's empowerment is solely a concern of Western societies, particularly European ones.

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