

A Journey towards Gender Equality

Dr. Pamela Chrabieh

I was born and raised during the 1970s-1980s war in Lebanon within a Christian Maronite family. The Maronite Church is an Eastern Catholic Syriac Church that had affirmed its communion with Rome since the 12th c. C.E. It is one of twenty-two Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with Rome. Its patriarch lives in Lebanon. Forty-three bishops and approximately five million faithful make up its presence throughout the world. The Maronite community is the largest Christian community in Lebanon in terms of the number of adherents, and it holds more political and economic power than its counterparts -- the Lebanese President, for instance, ought to be Maronite.

My childhood and teenage years were marked by the teachings of the Maronite/Catholic Churches, by the culture of violence, but also by the culture of conviviality and inclusivity that my parents transmitted to my sister and me. Although I spent every summer going to my neighborhood church, attending mass, celebrating religious festivities, and singing with the village choir - and this community was quite closed, misogynistic, excluding 'strangers' and people having different religious or sectarian belongings -, my parents never missed a chance to talk and dialogue and fight against gender-based discrimination, and by so doing they set an example of openness to "otherness" and to gender equality. Needless to say

that even the school that I used to attend was also a patriarchal environment in which women were rarely seen at the decision-making table -- such an environment enshrines the assumptions that heads of institutions must be male and that male voices rightfully dominate public and private spaces. Patriarchal environments/assumptions that I lived, and still live in, construct the female position as subordinate. Fortunately, I always had my parents offering alternative perspectives when it came to gender relations, which counterbalanced the gender-biased assumptions I was taught at school and in society.

My university years in Lebanon, first at the Holy Spirit University (USEK), then at the Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (Balamand University), where I majored in Religious Arts, Fine Arts, and the Restoration-Conservation of Icons, was also marked by contradictory teaching, between traditionalism and even conservatism of Maronite and Greek-Orthodox teachers and curricula on the one hand, and a liberal thought instilled by my late professor F. Antoine Lammens on the other. Lammens was an exceptional catholic priest who, in the 1990s, and against the mainstream current, promoted inclusive and equitable quality education, and learning opportunities that aim at achieving gender equality and empowering female students. I was only 19 years old when

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he taught my colleague and me, both young Maronites, that not only could we learn how to preserve the Greek-Orthodox sacred art heritage in particular, and the Southwestern Asian Christian cultural heritage in general, but that we could also excel in doing it as women.

Lammens believed in the role of the Church in welcoming and embracing the development and full participation of women in Christian communities, the Lebanese society, and the Levant region in general. In that perspective, he never missed an opportunity to acknowledge and welcome female students into a relationship of partnership with men, and to push forward an academic curriculum in sacred arts in which women would occupy positions of leadership. I still remember how he used to be supportive of women's perspectives, and how he argued with other priests and bishops about the urgency of affirming that human rights are at the core of humanity and of Christianity. I learned a great deal from him when it came to deconstructing gender-biased Catholic and Greek-Orthodox discourses and practices, and struggling against the perception of women in local religious communities as supporters only and hence means to an end rather than as ends in themselves in their own right. Unfortunately, Lammens was fought by both Maronite and Greek-Orthodox institutions in Lebanon and Syria, and, by the late 1990s, his mission was cut short by cancer.

Meanwhile, I was pursuing my fight against sexism, sectarianism, and other sorts of -isms as an activist and an artist. I participated in several protests throughout the 1990s, was

an active member of local groups and NGOs, and demands focused on women's and human rights, civil marriage, peacebuilding, etc. When I moved to Canada to pursue a master's degree in Theology, Religions, and Cultures, I continued to be involved in youth and women empowerment in Lebanon, while working with Canadian NGOs, Montreal-based students associations, and interreligious groups. I was fortunate enough to have had enlightened professors such as Jean-Francois Roussel, Aldina Da Silva, Denise Couture, Jean-Guy Nadeau, Robert David, etc. at the University of Montreal. In addition, I obtained a Ph.D. in Theology and Sciences and Religions and completed two postdoctoral research projects while teaching undergraduate courses. My journey in Canada reinforced and expanded my feminist knowledge and practice, with a focus on both secular and religious feminisms -- noting here that my feminism has been largely influenced by the third phase of feminism which began in the mid-1990s, a wave that was informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. In this phase, many constructs have been destabilized, including the notions of "universal womanhood," body, gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. Feminism in that perspective has more to do with ambiguity, glocality, the deconstruction of binary systems ("us-them"), and breaking boundaries.

In the early 2000s, I was a member of La Grappe, Féminismes et Interspiritualités (Feminisms and Inter-spiritualities) which organized non-institutionalized monthly gatherings and non-hierarchical/non-linear circles of feminist intra and inter-sectarian/interreligious dialogue. We

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used to share our stories in our own religious/sectarian communities, meditate, partake in rituals, empower each other, and celebrate our sisterhood, solidarity, and dissent. I was the only Levantine Christian woman in this group. Back in Lebanon in 2006, I started teaching at Saint Joseph University in Beirut (School of Religious Studies), and the Holy Spirit University-USEK (School of Theology). Again, two priests helped me in my journey as an academic and researcher at that time, a Jesuit and a Maronite who later became a bishop, but the path towards tenure was full of obstacles. I was told on numerous occasions that if I had a beard and was wearing the male monastic robe, it would have been easy to obtain tenure. I was the only secular woman professor teaching USEK 5th year theology students on Theology of Dialogue, as well as undergraduate students about interreligious dialogue, sciences of religions, and religion-politics relations. I had students and colleagues who appreciated the feminist conceptual approach and teaching, but many more were opposed to questioning gender-traditional and patriarchal institutions, and would not engage in debates on gender, agency, and religion. And when I used to be invited to participate in conferences about women's roles in religions, panels were full of male traditionalist and conservative scholars and clerics, and I was either seated at the end of the table, or with the audience -- "we are terribly sorry, but we could not find a place for you at the table" was the usual excuse.

The absence of a consensus on envisioned change within local Christian communities and academic institutions, and even a grow-

ing opposition to it, pushed me to create in 2012 an online network and a platform for feminist voices/narratives in the region -- entitled "Red Lips High Heels". From 2012 to 2017, authors, artists, and activists from different generations, socio-economic backgrounds, and religious/non-religious adherences, wrote about their experiences, observations, and perceptions of gender-based discrimination in Southwestern Asia and North Africa, including those about gender and religions, and gender equality. Some Christian and Muslim contributors argued for the emergence of a subjective turn that would eclipse traditional religions and open the door to expressive selfhood in a post-religious society. Others argued for progressive reform of institutionalized religions and the integration of women in decision-making processes. And there were a few who just wanted to offer alternative experiences of self, body, and spirituality that challenge dominant representations of the female. It was during these years that I published a book in Arabic on women's situations in ancient Southwestern Asia and North Africa (*Womanhood in Western Asia: A Journey to the Past*, Dar al Machreq, 2013), edited a book in English about gender and arts (*Reeds from Red Lips: Gender and Arts in Southwestern Asia*, 2017), and wrote countless articles and book chapters in French, English, and Arabic about feminisms in Lebanon and the region, followed by my most recent publications on gender, religious authority and interreligious dialogue with my Palestinian colleague and friend Dr. Nadia Wardeh (particularly "Against the Current: Rethinking Gender, Religious Authority and Interreligious Dialogue", in Middle

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Eastern Women: The Intersection of Law, Culture and Religion, edited by Mitri Raheb, Diyar Publishers & Dar al Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, Bethlehem, 2020).

In *Womanhood in Western Asia: A Journey to the Past*, I introduced my readers to practices of oppression and discrimination in the ancient Levant, but also to diverse examples of strong and independent women, who lived at times when the entire area had become patriarchal. In addition to mythology, the book focused on religious, cultural, and social practices, marriage customs, and legislation. From Ancient Mesopotamia to Arabia, Egypt, Persia, and Canaan, this exciting journey to the past concluded with an insight into the present and the identification of future creative theoretical and practical paths to follow. My main concern was that in times of disillusionment, people may seek a golden age in either the past or the future. Some feminists have situated such an age in the prehistoric past, -- up to the Late Neolithic, the age of the Mother Goddess, a period in which they believe women were at least equal in status with men. This was identified as a peaceful and egalitarian era compared to later aggressive, hierarchical, and patriarchal times. The idea of a golden age is attractive but did it ever really exist, and if it did, what caused its demise? Other feminists claimed that ancient religions and civilizations were oppressive; that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam carry oppressive customs from their predecessors or that these monotheist religions freed - or tried to free - women from pagan oppression; and that the Western modern civilization - mainly the European and North

American - brought hope to the rest of the world by providing a suitable space for liberty and equality.

Indeed, common academic visions of Southwestern Asia and North Africa often describe women in this region to be oppressed, weak and needing rescue. In that perspective, one of the main goals of this book was to deconstruct positivist or essentialist views of Southwestern Asian and North African women digging into the past. This remains one of my main goals as an activist. Thus, it was designed to give its readers an understanding of the often forgotten foundations of many contemporary cultures and religions in this region concerning womanhood, especially as they apply to the status and relationships of men and women today. Investigating the past and examining the development of gender norms, identities, and roles, contribute to understanding ideas, practices, customs, and trends that have shaped Southwestern Asian and North African cultures. Although any historical investigation involves individual interpretation and much speculation, this journey to the past helped me reshape my own feminist prism. One can read the ancient sources concerning women and their place in society, but to a large degree, they are all secondary sources that were written by men about women. In that sense, there will always be a difficulty to come up with 'general truths' about the past and current situations, discourses, practices, obstacles, and opportunities towards gender equality.

In "Against the Current: Rethinking Gender, Religious Authority and Interreligious Dialogue", as well as in a chapter I contributed to

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an upcoming book entitled *Surviving Jewel: An Enduring Story of Christianity in the Middle East* (edited by Mitri Raheb and Mark Lamp-ort), I argued that most religious institutions and grassroots interfaith initiatives in South-western Asia and North Africa are attributed to men, leadership continues to be predominantly male, and it is to be expected that women appear absent or underrepresented in official dialogues between religions. This invisibility tends to be a global phenomenon, but it is acute in our region, particularly when it comes to the decision-making circles within and across religious/sectarian borders. Indeed, although there are many women and feminists who are actively engaged in making changes in their religious communities, the mainstream patriarchal orientation of religious/theology discourses and practical practices, and the challenges of contemporary forms of religious fundamentalism and conservatism, limitations on women's visibility, credibility, and agency, remain numerous. Other causes include the fact that the authority figure "owes its allegiance to the boundaries and structures created by tradition, and to written laws that codify tradition: "For example, many Christian churches are today episcopal [such as the Maronite] which means that the principal authority figures known as bishops control the functioning and direction of the churches, and this authority is traced back to Jesus-Christ. This means that the inheritance is itself a function of tradition and that the characteristics of the office of bishop, such as the requirement to be male, are also dependent upon religious tradition. In my opinion, this relation between religious authority and tradition can be re-

thought as 'tradition' itself is not a fixed a-temporal entity. As I see it, the concept of tradition should be analyzed in relation to the question of cultural continuities/discontinuities, cultural interpenetrations, and invention".

In addition, and as mentioned in "Against the Current", Dr. Wardeh and I stated that we "believe the main cause of marginalization [of women] lies on what is considered the normative discourse on, or approach of and practice of religious authority – i.e. complementarianism. For instance, when it comes to the Maronite Church, complementarianism is the official position in gender matters. Priesthood/ordination for example is tied to men's roles/responsibilities, and women can [only] be prayer leaders outside the context of a mass, ministries of the word, and giving of holy communion previously consecrated by a priest. Complementarians also believe that in the family, it is the husband who has direct authority from God, thus has the final word on any decisions. He is the mediator of God's will to the wife and children". As I continued to argue in the same article, "women today exercise many roles within the Maronite and other Catholic Churches in Southwestern Asia and North Africa. However, a direct consequence of Maronite/Catholic official discourses on religious authority and gender issues for centuries and until the present day is the almost total absence of women in high-level executive positions in their communities, in full-time academic positions in Schools of Theology, and in the decision-making process of interreligious institutional dialogue. In addition, Maronite feminist theologians are considered a

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rare breed in Lebanon, and Maronite feminists either do not openly tackle religious authority and gender issues as they are still considered taboo, and/or focus on the legal framework and socio-political issues." I concluded my argumentation by identifying reasons for the possibility of rethinking the Maronite theology of gender relations, and defined gender equality in the following statement: "when women and men have the same opportunities, resources, protections and rights, and when these should not depend on whether they are born with traditional male or female identifiers (i.e. anatomy). Gender equality does not mean that women and men become the same. Rather, among many things, it means equal opportunity in economic/political/social participation and decision-making processes, equal access to benefits and community resources, gender equity - ensuring fair treatment according to respective gifts and needs - and gender justice, which addresses the brokenness in the relationships between genders (domestic violence, sexual abuse, honor killings, trafficking for sex and labor, female genital mutilation, childhood marriage, etc.)". In that perspective, "communal and societal transformation is unachievable if one gender is left behind. (...) When all genders are encouraged to use their gifts and to fulfill their potential, communities and societies can truly flourish".

In conclusion, it is true that there are many obstacles that Christian women in particular, most women in general, and Southwestern Asians/North Africans face, such as the continuous state of internal wars (physical/psychological), sectarianism, extremism, inequalities, corruption, socio-economic and political crises, etc. And yet, despite the gloominess of the situation, particularly in Lebanon, my journey towards gender equality has uncovered an explosion of diverse activist and feminist voices and initiatives in the region and within the diaspora that are worth studying, encouraging, and including in the much-needed dialogue among feminists, and between feminists and other actors within local communities -- a dialogue that helps to harness diversity, overcome divisions, and achieve equality of rights and opportunities. While further investigation, activism, and agency/empowerment are definitely needed, I believe these change-makers or agents of change (including women Theologians in their respective communities) offer an alternative to the disenchantment experienced by many institutions and non-governmental organizations -- a disenchantment that results from aiming for only a swift/quick generalized transformation concerning women's rights. This alternative is about taking small, varied, and diffuse but continuous steps, and about recognizing and appreciating the many lights that help us walk through the tunnel.