



LUND
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STV003
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United by Principles

Transversal Politics and the Women's Social Movement in
Lebanon

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Abstract

In this field study, the possibilities and obstacles facing five organisations in the women's social movement in Lebanon are described and discussed.

In the light of globalisation, transnational social movements have emerged as an alternative political arena to promote various issues of global concern, among them women's rights. The idea of 'transversal politics' emphasises the importance of social movements, as they can unite a diversity of people under a shared value or a common interest, and play the role as both sites and sources of democratisation. The transversal politics model aims to expand democracy into the spheres of society – such as the international arena, the family and the economy – where it is still very much absent or suffering from strong deficits.

Lebanon is a fragmented society, where political identity is closely tied to sect affiliation. United by shared values, the women's social movement manages to bridge the sectarian divisions and work for gender equality and democratisation. By questioning the social and political structures of society, they challenge the borders of what is political, as well as the boundaries of the social identity.

Keywords: Lebanon, women's social movement, transversal politics, democratisation, civil society

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1 Introduction

The advancement of women's rights has been a difficult task world wide, and in the Middle East it has encountered many obstacles. Even in the light of the difficulties for human rights advancement throughout the Middle East, the civil society in various forms of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisation) and social movements has managed to put the question of women's rights on the agenda and take small but significant steps in changing the conditions for women. (Afkhami & Friedl, 1997:ix-xi) In this thesis, we study how this work is done by the women's social movement in Lebanon. However, as we will see, working within the civil society in a Middle Eastern context has its complications.

Theory about the civil society has mainly been developed in a western liberal context, that is Europe and USA. Although being a multi-faceted and much debated concept, the dominating perspective has referred to it as the sphere between the state and the family, including networks, unions, associations, and NGOs. As such it is supposed to counter balance the state power and provide an arena for discussions, debates and co-operations; an arena to promote democracy as well as human rights and other interests of the citizens. Within a weak state, strong sub-state actors may take over and become the actual authority, and as a consequence de-legitimise the state and politicise the public sphere. Therefore, a strong state is believed to be needed to ensure an independent civil society. (Edwards, 2004:7-9, 15, 41, 83; Grugel, 2002:93-97)

As a consequence of its liberal origin, civil society theory often contains embedded assumptions about the citizen's rights and responsibilities that are closely related to liberal democratic ideals. It is also based on the dichotomy between the public and the private sphere – the public consisting of the political sphere and civil society, both traditionally male, and the private being the domestic and traditionally female sphere. (Eschle, 2001:25, 229; Edwards, 2004:5-11, 30; Grugel, 2002:1, 92)

Since the 1960s, the tradition of separating the private and public within social and political thought has been heavily criticised by feminists, as it marginalizes women into the domestic sphere and thereby does not recognize them fully as political actors. (Eschle, 2001:229) Two of the critics of this separation are the political scientist Catherine Eschle and Nira Yuval Davis, professor of Gender and Ethnic studies. They claim that if politics is seen as limited to the public sphere of society, it can not challenge democratic problems of gender-inequality within the private sphere, the family or the economy. Eschle and Yuval-Davis find this practice of placing democratic activity only within the realm of the state as insufficient. The normative model of transversal politics, introduced into social science by Yuval-Davis and further developed by Eschle, is based on very different assumptions concerning the nature of the political, the appropriate sphere

for politics and how politics should be carried out. Here, as we shall see, the civil society in general and the social movements in particular, have very prominent roles to play as sites, sources and means of democratisation, as they can straddle the public/private divide.

Eschle and Yuval-Davis are of course not the only ones promoting a re-definition of democracy. Iris Marion Young theorises in her book *Inclusion and Democracy* the necessary ontological separation between personal identity and social affinities. She argues that each person always has affinities with many social groups, that she can move between them, and that each person's individual personality is her own. A person's belonging to a social group does not constitute her identity, but rather positions her and gives the frame within which the individual as agent constructs her identity. Young promotes cooperation and communication across social boundaries. This is not only possible, but a democratic necessity, since it expands the social frame for the individual. (Young, 2000:99-102) Even though Young draws somewhat different conclusions from this view on identities than Eschle, it is still similar to the ontological base of the transversal model. A plurality of diverse identities and belongings is seen as bringing different, equally valuable perspectives into an issue. The basic idea of transversal politics is to organise around an idea or value without giving up one's individual identity, which is possible because of the separation between identities and values. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:131)

Even though the transversal model has been developed into an 'ideal type', transversal politics was first a term used to describe an empirical reality, a way of organizing and 'doing politics'. This way of organizing was especially developed for facilitating dialogue between women in a context of ethnic conflict: the conflict in former Yugoslavia and the one between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:125, 129) Since the model was first developed as a tool to be used in a context similar to that of Lebanon – a 'non-western' setting, featuring historical ethnic conflict – we have found transversal politics a very inspiring model for promoting gender-equality and expanding democracy. Transversal politics is essentially based on a participatory, dialogue-based democratic ideal, where communication is taking place under common value-systems and shared goals. (Eschle, 2001: 7-8, 228-229, 231) The transversal idea is challenging the liberal notion of civil society in the sense that it denounces the ontological and political separation between the public and the private and challenges the traditional arenas and forums for political participation.

Since the transversal model is based on research and theorising on feminist movements, and due to our special interest in the empowerment of women, we have decided to study specifically the women's social movement¹ in Lebanon. In line with Eschle's argument (2001:2, 122-123), we adopt here a definition of a

¹ To avoid confusion: the word 'women' is here used to signify the principle of achieving gender-equality, not that the movement is exclusively for women. Men are active members in all the organisations. We use the word 'women' because the organisations themselves sometimes expressed wariness concerning the term 'feminist', and because the focus of the organisations mainly was on the situation of women.

social movement as a heterogeneous network of organisations and other actors who all work to achieve a common goal under shared principles. We are interested in the possibilities for organisations in the women's social movement to promote gender-equality in a fragmented society such as Lebanon. To give a background, we will start by briefly sketch those historical and current elements of the Lebanese context that we find important to understand the situation for women's social movement in Lebanon today.

1.1 The Lebanese Context

The Lebanese state was created 1943 as a result of a series of compromises between elites from the religious sects in the country, mainly Christian Maronites and Sunni Muslims, and the French mandatory power. It was established as a liberal state – liberal, but not secular. The Lebanese state was established as what has come to be called a 'confessional democracy', where each religious sect was assured representation in parliament, as well as governmental and civil service positions. This was done in correspondence to the group's proportion of the whole population at the time of the census of 1932. Needless to say, demographic conditions have changed since then, rendering the initial distribution of political resources obsolete. (Abul-Husn, 1998:76-77; Barak, 2003:311) As a result of the confessional political structure, a great deal of autonomy was granted to the sects. The leaders were responsible for providing education and social services to their respective sect-members, which reinforced the loyalty towards the sect. By delegating these important functions to the religious communities, the state-construction was made inherently weak. In practice, the sects controlled the state rather than being controlled by the state. (Barak, 2003:308-315; Hamzeh, 2001:173,176; Joseph, 2000:129; Makdisi, 1996:25; Suleiman, 1978)

The important relationship between the sect and its members were even formalized through the Constitution and the citizenship-laws. Instead of to the state itself, each citizenship was connected to one of the 17 recognised sects. Religious affiliation was thereby inscribed as the citizens' most important public attribute and identity, and religious belonging have since been found by some scholars to be of greater importance in the construction of the individual identity than is the national identity. (Barak, 2003:308-310; Krayyem, 1997:432; Makdisi, 1996:24-25) According to e.g. Ussama Makdisi, there is a clear dichotomy between constructing 'the nation state' and the prevalent sectarianism of the Lebanese society. He sees a nation-state as inclusive, stable and democratic, while sectarianism is depicted as exclusionary, undemocratic and disordered. Sectarianism undermines secular and national ideals and creates subversive religious loyalties. (Makdisi, 1996:23)

In 1975-1990 Lebanon was suffering from a civil war. While it was far from a pure religious conflict, sectarianism and the fragmentation of the Lebanese society has been seen as an important explanatory factor. When the war was put to an end with the Ta'if Agreement in 1990, instead of breaking up the confessional

structure of the state, the agreement again established the sects as the basis of political representation. Only minor adjustments regarding political representation of the various sects were made. (Krayyem, 1997:425; Makdisi, 1996:26) Today, according to Rosemary Sayigh, sectarianism is not fading out. (2001:100) The non-sectarian political parties are losing influence and disappearing and sectarianism is adopting and taking new forms in the modern state of Lebanon. (Makdisi, 1996:25) Because of the division sectarianism creates the confessional structure makes the emergence of a public, non-politicized “civil” arena difficult to achieve.

Confessional division in the political sphere, and a lack of a non-politicized civil society for public debate, has had pervasive effects on the organisation of the women’s social movement in Lebanon. Historically, before the civil war, few women’s organisations were able to overcome the sectarian political divisions. Not only parties but all political organisations were highly fractured along ideological and, above all, sectarian lines. Women’s issues have had to give way to what’s best for the sect, something defined mainly by male leaders of the community. (Peteeet in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:142; Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130)

Also general trends within the Middle East have complicated the work of the women’s movement. The importance of kinship and family-relations, as well as the pervasive structuring principle of patriarchy in the society, have been difficult obstacles in the struggle for gender equality. (Kandiyoti in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:57; Joseph, 2000:116-129) According to Sarah Graham-Brown, there is a tendency in the Middle East to accuse women, who question patriarchal norms, of cultural and religious betrayal. To challenge norms of women’s subordination and circumscribed sexual behaviour is viewed as accepting “Western norms of sexual and personal behaviour” (Graham-Brown in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:30). Accusing women of cultural betrayal is usually perceived a ‘non-western’ phenomenon – especially in the west. However, even though it may be more common in the public debate in the Middle East, we should not forget that women’s role as “bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour” is a general phenomenon, not confined to the Middle East (Yuval Davis, 1997a:45-46).

Finally, there are considerable socio-economic differences throughout the Middle East, something that of course also applies to women. Thus, resources and possibilities for political activism, as well as what is perceived as ‘the common goal’, are very different depending on women’s family background and class membership. (Joseph in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:38, 40)

1.2 The Research Problem and Purpose of the Study

Eschle advocates social movements, and specifically transversally organised movements, as both the means and the goal of democratisation. The closer a social movement is to the ideal of the transversal model, the better it can work as a tool in the democratisation of society, which in the end should be structured in accordance with the transversal ideal. (Eschle, 2001:231)

However, certain political, structural and cultural circumstances in the Lebanese society have led us to believe that an organisation according to transversal ideals is rather difficult to implement for social movements in this context. We consider the theorising about the transversal model to carry some problems in that neither Eschle nor Yuval-Davis presents enough empirical findings about transversal organisations. The theoretical model's ontological assumptions are based on only a few cases of observed 'transversalism'. The practical circumstances under which it is feasible, and potential problems it can encounter when implemented in reality, are left unexplored. In her book *'The Space Between Us'* the sociologist Cynthia Cockburn sets out to "fill the container 'transversal politics' with content" (Cockburn, 1998:9). She studies three different projects, working under different circumstances, dealing with and targeting different problems. Like her, and like Eschle, we are convinced of the importance of context specificity in studying movements. Different circumstances calls for different organisational structures and different strategies, but also allow movements from different contexts to connect and share experiences. As we shall see, this is essential to the transversal idea.

In sum, we believe that we need more knowledge about under what circumstances transversal politics are possible and useful, and how the movement deals with problems when they come up. Based on this notion, we have chosen to study supposedly transversal organisations from the Lebanese women's social movement, and tried to find an answer to the following problem:

- How do a social movement, with women's rights and democratisation of society on its agenda, work in a fragmented and divided society such as Lebanon, and does it have possibilities to work as a tool for democratisation of the Lebanese society?

The purpose of this thesis is threefold. In line with Eschle's view, we believe that gender-inequality is a democratic problem, and that social movements can fill an important function dealing with this problem. Because of this, our first goal is to establish a better knowledge about what democratic problems the specific context of the Lebanese society carries regarding women's situation. Secondly, we wish to depict how the Lebanese context influences the women's social movement, its organisation, goals, strategies and activities. Finally, based on our findings and on previous research on the subject, we will evaluate how well the model of transversal politics, with its different components, functions, and strategies, is implemented in the specific context of the Lebanese society.

Even though we have chosen to confine our study to the Lebanese society, we do not perceive the state of Lebanon as a fixed, homogenous structure, different from all other societies and unchangeable, ready to be singled out and studied. Our conviction of the importance of context specificity does not come from an essentialist understanding of the social reality of the Lebanese state as in any sense 'natural'. Interaction across different kinds of borders between people and socially constructed entities (not only countries), and the changes they produce, are an important feature of the social structure itself. Equally important are the

different 'meta-and sub-structures' of society, such as transnational networks, geographical regions or ideas about the family. However, we do believe that state institutions, with their laws or lack of laws, guarded physical boundaries and very real ways of imposing their power on the population, really affect people's behaviour. Indeed, the very 'idea of a country' structure people's behaviour, whether they are burning patriots cherishing it, or separatists wanting to leave it.² In conclusion, while defining the space within Lebanon's boundaries as a relevant entity to study, we recognize, even emphasise, the importance of focusing on the dynamics and 'meta- and sub-structures' of society.

² For a further discussion of the pervasive structuring effect of the idea of nations, see e.g. Michael Billig's work *Banal Nationalism*, 1995.

2 Theory and Method

In this chapter we develop the theoretical and methodological frames through which we will perform our analysis. In order to achieve the overarching purpose of this thesis – to study the women’s organisations and how they ‘do’ transversal politics in the Lebanese context – we first need to define what transversal politics is. This theoretical frame is given by a systematic description of the model developed by its main advocates Catherine Eschle and Nira Yuval-Davis. How the model has been used in the study is subsequently explained in the method section.

2.1 The Transversal Politics model

Eschle defines the ideal of transversal politics as:

“[...] a process of political negotiation encompassing actors in disparate geographic and social locations. It involves the construction of a joint political project through dialogue that recognizes and respects the different subject positions of the participants and that is characterized by a critical stance toward territorial and social boundaries.” (Eschle, 2001:207)

In the following descriptive section, this ‘ideal type’ of transversal politics is broken down to what we consider are its most important elements. We have not developed fully all of the theoretical discussions of the model, and only touched briefly upon the concept of power and the international dimension of it. We considered that a full discussion of the ontological positions underlying the model, however interesting, would make the description needlessly complicated and in some aspects irrelevant to our own analysis.

2.1.1 The scope of ‘the Political’ and Democracy

Power is, according to Eschle, multidimensional. It is international and boundary-less, it works through the state, the economic system, family relations and through ideas about race and gender. It works in very part of the world, but in different ways in different contexts. (Eschle, 2001:218, 204-206, 128-129) The role of democracy is then, according to Eschle, to contest all coercive power relations, be they on the international level, within the family or anywhere in-between (Ibid, 2001:130). For democracy to really have this function, and not only follow the liberal view of the role of democracy and politics, it is necessary to expand the

concept of ‘the political’ itself. It is imperative to expand democracy to all those spheres and areas in life where coercive power is exercised. What is considered political, and therefore focus for democratic dialogue and change, should consequently be expanded to include also the economy, the domestic sphere and the intimate areas of life, as well as to the international arenas. According to Eschle, this expansion of democracy can and should be done through the social movements. Still, all social movements are not democratic. For them to work as means of democratisation, it is crucial that they allow for heterogeneity and an ongoing dialogue, that is, that they ‘do’ politics the transversal way. (Eschle, 2001:212, 130, 231,128)

Nevertheless, even though transversal social movements are seen as the most important arenas for democracy, the state as an institution still has an important function. Depending on context, strategic connections with – as well as demands for greater access to – the state, may well be appropriate strategies for transversal movements. However, a sceptical stance towards the state is promoted by Eschle, since the state is likely to be hierarchical, coercive, and interact with other oppressive sources of power. (Eschle, 2001: 212-215)

2.1.2 The Political Actor

Eschle argues for a view of the individual’s identity as plural, complex, multifaceted, longing for mobility and constantly renegotiable (Eschle, 2001:135, 136, 212). This is in essence the ‘ideal transversal identity’. The fluidity of the individual’s identity is in the heart of the transversal model, and is crucial for it to work:

“The idea is that each participant in the dialogue brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership and identity.” (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130)

The rooting and shifting of identities is crucial for doing transversal politics, as it let individuals find common interests and share some values, even though rooted in different contexts. While keeping ones own perspective throughout the dialogue, it is vital to be empathetic and have respect for others perspectives and frameworks in the process of building coalitions around common goals. This is possible because the transversal model is built on a differentiation between social identities and social values, and a belief that common perspectives on reality can exist across differential positionings and identities as long as the actors have the same value systems.³ (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130) Because of this emphasise on

³ For a more elaborate discussion of the separation of personal identity and social belonging, and what this means for the possibilities for democratic work across social borders, see also e.g. *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000) by Iris Marion Young.

shared values, transversal politics is only achievable, and should only be attempted, when the actors share values and goals that are compatible with one another. According to Yuval-Davis, it is worth to note that transversal politics “are not always possible, as conflicting interests of people who are situated in specific positionings are *not* always reconcilable” (1997a:130, her emphasis). However, because the individual is seen as mobile in relation to her social belonging, Yuval-Davis remains hopeful about the possibility of reaching solidarity and cooperation in almost all cases. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130-131)

2.1.3 The Ideal Structure and Strategies

To Eschle, the movement organisation as a site for democratic struggle is *per se* both allowing for and fostering coalitions around common goals. In the frame of a social movement, the identity of the political actor can be just so fluid and flexible as is the ideal of the transversal model. This is why Eschle promotes the social movement form and transversal politics as the site, the means and the goal of democratic change. (Eschle, 2001:132,133, 231)

The ideal structure and strategies of the transversal model is based on a democratic ideal, developed within the black and third world feminist debate, which is called ‘politics of location and connection’. The context-specificity of the operations of power demands that the development of strategies and structure of democratic struggle must be located to the site of the struggle and the local movement. Consequently, according to this view, there are no universal strategies for ‘doing politics’. However, the recognition that all perspectives are partial calls for connections and coalition-building between movements and people with different perspectives. By connecting different movements, a “fuller picture of reality” can be formed. (Eshle, 2001:132) Through dialogue within and between movements, political projects can be formed across both territorial and social boundaries. (Eschle, 2001:131-134, 207)

The concepts of participation and dialogue are indeed the most central ones in structuring transversal politics. In the ideal model, all actors willing to participate should be included, and measures should be taken to compensate for power inequalities and to make participants recognize the partiality of their own perspective. The flat, non-hierarchal and fluid, heterogeneous, and continually reconstructed nature of social movements makes them an ideal structure for such participatory democracy. (Eschle, 2001:122-123,132-133, 207)

Still, the importance of participatory democracy in the transversal model does not mean that everybody must be included on every level of democratic decision-making. For democracy to be efficient, the role of decision-maker can be delegated to a few people. However, they should be seen and function as advocates, not representatives, and their messages to the decision-making body must be a result of transversal dialogues. (Yuval-Davis, 1997b:19)

2.2 Method

To achieve the purpose of this thesis, we have asked and tried to answer the following questions:

1. What do the organisations within the Lebanese women's social movement identify as the main problems for women in Lebanon?
2. How do these problems and the structure of the Lebanese society affect the organisations, their strategies and the status of democracy in the country?
3. What do the answers to 1 and 2 mean for the possibility of transversal organisation of the women's social movement in Lebanon?

This thesis is partly what one can define as a case study (Esaïasson et al, 2004:35-36). We have studied a 'case' of social movement, advocating gender equality in a divided and fragmented society. We have here had a descriptive approach, trying to find out how these organisations perceive themselves, the Lebanese society, and the interaction between them.

However, we also wanted to see how close the Lebanese women's social movement comes to the ideal of the transversal model, in terms of function and organisation, strategies, and possibilities to work as a tool for democratisation of the Lebanese society. In some respects, this part of the study is therefore what Esaïasson et al. classifies as an 'ideal-type analysis', in that it tries to determine to what extent the reality resembles the ideal (2004:154-155). According to their definition, the word 'ideal' in 'ideal types' does not reflect a normative position. The ideal type is a blue-print, a tautological definition, to which one can compare the reality, but it does not say anything about the 'goodness' or 'badness' of this reality.

The transversal model, on the other hand, is highly normative. It is built upon several ontological assumptions about the nature of power, democracy, human relationships and social structures that are not in themselves normative, but that are interpreted in the model in terms of how we should deal with this reality. Therefore, while being in essence a study of 'to what extent does the social movement resemble the ideal-type of the transversal model?', this part of the thesis deals with questions of how the Lebanese women's social movement *should be*, and not only how *it is*. It is normatively charged in that we neither can separate the model from its normative positions, nor from our own normative view of a transversal organisation as a good site and means of democratisation and democracy.

In our methodological considerations we are of course inspired by the epistemological assumptions underlying the transversal model itself: that all knowledge held by a subject is partial and incomplete, but therefore not invalid. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:129) This applies to the people we have interviewed as well as to us as researchers. Working with qualitative methods described below, we have interviewed representatives from five Lebanese women's organisations. We have tried to be sensitive to the considerations appropriate to reflexive research. Facts, according to Alvesson and Sköldbërg, are always a matter of interpretation, which in turn is based on theory or perspective (1994:49, 12). Adhering to this

view, but without going into a deeper discussion of the meta-theoretical assumptions underlying it, we believe that the role of us as researchers is to interpret the material in relation to theory, while to the greatest extent possible being aware of and making clear our own frames of reference and interaction with the interviewees (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994:14-15). What we have done in this study is to perform interviews and interpret the answers in relation to our own frames of reference, as well as the transversal model, previous research about women's situation in the Middle East, and theoretical discussions relevant to the phenomena brought up by the interviewees.

In choosing the way to perform our research, we have mainly relied on the work of sociologist Cynthia Cockburn (1998) and human ecology researcher Pernilla Ouis (2005), both performing 'reflexive', interpretative research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994:12). Since both of them work in a research-tradition closely related to the one represented by Nira Yuval-Davis and Catherine Eschle, but have the advantage of actually publishing empirical works of research relevant to our study, we have used their described methods as guidelines and inspiration in our work. Due to a difference in resources however, both money-wise and in terms of time available, we have not been able to copy their methods completely.

2.2.1 Choosing the Organisations

Since we did not know beforehand whether the organisations we wanted to study where in fact at all transversally organised, we needed a kind of 'operational tool' to discriminate between 'potential transversal' and 'not transversal' organisations. We therefore came up with a narrow definition of transversalism, which we used as a first 'test' for the organisations to pass to be interesting: Each organisation needed to *claim to be willing and able to include members from all religious groups in society*. Furthermore, they had to *claim a democratic ambition, both in internal organisation and in their work and objectives*. Of course, we had to rely on second-source material, such as information available on websites on the internet and word of mouth, in this initial discriminating process.

Our first interview was with Lina Abou-Habib, director of CRTD-A (Collective for Research & Training on Development-Action). We had established contact with her via e-mail, basing our choice to contact the organisation on information given on the website of one of their projects: the MACMAG-GLIP project. During the interview, Lina Abou-Habib informed us that CRTD-A had initiated what is called the Arab Women's Right to Nationality Campaign (in short the Nationality Campaign) in which several other women's organisations had taken part. She was kind enough to give us their contact information. In the end, we were able to interview representatives from two more organisations working with the Nationality Campaign: Wadad Chakhtoura at the LWDG (The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering) and Zoya Rouhana and Ghida Anani at KAFA.

Through the Internet we had also come into contact with LECORVAW (Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women), an organisation targeting

violence against women. Here we had the advantage of getting to interview two representatives at two separate occasions; Maya Bou-Ayache and Rafif Rida Sidawi.

Incidentally, the people currently involved in KAFA had previously been part of LECORVAW, and the focus of both organisations seemed to be generally the same, although KAFA includes also violence against children and trafficking in their areas of attention.

These four organisations are without doubt transversal in the sense of our narrow definition of the word, that is, they all target women from the different sects in Lebanon, they apparently strive to include anyone ready to share their ideals and they all have democratic ambitions in their organisation and purpose. The fifth organisation, the Najdeh Association, however, was somewhat different. While having a democratic organisation and working for a democratisation of the society, and while they do include Lebanese citizens in their organisation, they target specifically Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Given the special circumstances of Palestinian refugees, legally and otherwise, we judged this to be compatible with a transversal ideal. The problems for Palestinians are partially an effect of the structure of the Lebanese state. Democratisation of the society, which very much depends on a change of the situation for the Palestinians, therefore demands strategies specific to this context.

2.2.2 The Interviews

For our interviews we used a semi-structured design, including both open and closed questions. (Kvale, 1997:117-120) A set of broader, as well as more detailed, questions were prepared (see Appendix) and posed to all the interviewees, but their answers were in some cases followed up by additional questions. We believe that the advantage with a semi-structured interview technique is that the interviewer remains open to information that the informants give and by that is open to widen the study's focus and get new interesting perspectives. The choice to do the interview more as 'a conversation' was also made to let the interviewees feel that what she choose to talk about was important: If it was important to them we considered it is also relevant for us in this study.

In this study, there was no time for a participatory research method, observation over a longer period, or in-depth interviews with many different members of the organisations, as was practiced by Cynthia Cockburn in her research (2001:2-5). Neither could we do Focus Group Discussions, such that Pernilla Ouis used in her interviews with teenage girls in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen (2005:11-15). We were limited in our choices on method to one that would give result in three weeks. We therefore choose to do interviews with those people that had the time and wanted to talk to us.

2.2.3 Interpreting the Interviews

As Cockburn observes (2001:3), one must have in mind that the relation between the researcher and the researched is complicated. Firstly, it is not always possible to communicate exactly what one wants to say, neither for the researcher nor the interviewee – the possibility of misunderstandings must be taken into consideration. Secondly, according to Ouis (2005:18), many times people talk in normative terms – they express what they think ought to be instead of what is. The possibility of misinterpretation of meaning is obviously a risk. Thirdly, since neither of us speaks Arabic, communication had to take place in English, or French in the case of LWDG. Although a translator was always present on those occasions when the interviewee did not feel comfortable speaking English, there is of course a risk that meaning or nuances are lost in translation. Finally, it is also very important to remember that we have been given individual peoples' account of how they perceive the reality, and this can not be treated as fully representing all of the people in the different organisations.

When doing the interviews and interpreting the material, we have taken great care to remember that each account of reality is partial, and that what the interviewees have told us is not necessarily a full account of reality. According to Tim May, there is a risk that interviews mirror how organisations wish to be seen, rather than how they really are. The way around this problem, he says, is for the interviewer to establish a relation of trust with the interviewee. (May, 1997:159) If you have succeeded in this is of course a matter of perception. However, most of the time, when performing the interviews, we felt directness, openness and a willingness to communicate among the interviewees; both around issues that were uncontroversial, and in matters that could be viewed as controversial for the organisation or for our view on the Lebanese society. In short, we would say that we managed to establish trustful relations, and that we were given a picture of the women's social movement that corresponds with the their own view.

2.2.4 Material

All the interviews were recorded to the greatest extent possible. In cases of technical problems, or when the conversations continued after the recorders were turned of, notes were taken and are included in the transcribed versions of the interviews.

Apart from the transcribed interviews and additional material in the form of brochures given to us by the organisations, we have also relied on previous research about women's situation and organisation in the Middle East. The most prominent of these is the work of Suad Joseph, Professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies at the University of California. We have found her very useful because of her informative and extensive work on the subject, and since her

theoretical perspective and terminology is similar to that of our interviewees. Concerning citizenship-legislation we have mainly relied on the comparative study of Middle Eastern citizenship-laws written by Uri Davis (1997).

In our theoretical discussions we have of course mainly relied on the works of Catherine Eschle and Nira Yuval-Davis. When discussing framing and the strategies of the organisations, we have however relied on the work of Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activism beyond Borders* (1998). We find their discussion about social movements and their strategies relevant to, and in correspondence with, the analysis of Eschle and Davis.

The articles used as reference material have been found in the internet databases JSTOR and ELIN, through the homepage www.lub.lu.se.

3 Studying Women's Organisations in Lebanon

In this chapter we have let ourselves be led by the empirical material itself, that is, the different sections are based on themes identified during the interviews, by us and the interviewees together. This approach is in line with our choice of a qualitative method, in that it takes its departure in the perspective of the interviewees rather than beforehand defined categories (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1994:10). Our ambition is neither to put words in the mouths of the interviewees, nor to ascribe to them opinions that they have not expressed. Theory and material collected from previous research will therefore be used to comment, explain, develop or question our findings, not the other way around.

3.1 Identified Problems

We start by discussing the different problems that the organisations identified in the Lebanese society. Transversal organisations are, according to the ideal, supposed to work in context-sensitive ways, which makes the identification of the specific problems of the context crucial.

3.1.1 Patriarchy, Family, and Sect

A major problem identified by the women interviewed is the structures of patriarchy and confessionalism – the two dominating structures in the Lebanese society. As we will see, these structures are generally considered by the organisations to be a main obstacle for improving women's rights. Lina Abou-Habib from CRTD-A states: "In the Lebanese society, I think – particularly now – what are the obstacles are patriarchy and confessionalism, which both work against women" (2005-11-25). None of the interviewees defined exactly what they meant by the term patriarchy. Suad Joseph defines patriarchy as a social system, which is exercised through kinship-relations, that privileges males and elders at the expense of younger persons. Women are, according to its principles, supposed to respect and defer to their husbands, fathers, brothers, grandparents, uncles and male cousins. Women can gain power through the patriarchal system by age or by wealth. However, according to Joseph, even though it is influential, patriarchy in Lebanon should not be viewed as static – in many respects it is fluid

and continually challenged. (Joseph, 2000:124-125; in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:2-4)

Even though being separate structures of power, sect and kin groups both privilege men and elders, and are reinforcing patriarchal power structures. In the extended kin group this ends up in what Joseph calls “the paradigm of care/control”. Men have control over females in their kin group, but they also have the responsibility for them; the structure cares for those it controls. (Joseph 2000:116-125) As women are dependent of their kin for protection and care, socially and economically, their identity is tightly connected to their kin. Identity, for women as well as for men, is therefore in many ways ‘locked’ to family and community, making them hard to step out from and change. (Joseph in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:40)

Since the Constitution privileges sect and kin groups as political entities, patriarchal structures affect the entire Lebanese society. Religious affiliation is generally not separated from political representation, and kinship is central to the political and social identity of each person and make up “the primary identity and loyalty [...] competing only with religion” (Joseph 2000:117) Kin and sect belonging are providing the channels to social and political security, and are the main political structures in which both responsibilities and loyalties are found. The sectarian groups coincide to a large extent with kin groups, and together they have provided the structure of governance. (Joseph 2000:117-120, 123) Wadad Chakhtoura from LWDG means that this political system prioritizes the sects as groups, which leads to a lack of freedom for the individual citizen. (2005-11-30)

3.1.2 Violence and lack of Participation

As a consequence of the confessional system and patriarchy, the organisations identified two major problems in the Lebanese society: domestic violence and a lack of participation. Violence within families is generally viewed as being caused by either lack of awareness of the problem, or an accepting mentality in the society – a certain amount of battering is seen as normal. “The biggest obstacle is that the society is not aware of the problem! [...] There is a very big level of ignorance.” (Zoya Rouhana 2005-12-06) Maya Bou-Ayache at LECORVAW expresses the same:

“We tend to normalize the issue of violence against women. First it is the fathers right or the older brothers right to hit the daughter or the sister, and then it is the husbands right to hit his wife.” “And sometimes the women are victims of their mothers, the mothers beats her daughter up.” (2005-11-25)

This suggests that also women, through the principles of patriarchy, can legitimately abuse their daughters.

An additional effect of patriarchal norms and traditional views about gender-roles is that the women themselves are being blamed for the abuse. Maya Bou-Ayache: “They say: ‘Oh, what did you do to deserve to be beaten up? Maybe she

is not doing her duties as well at home, you know, like a good woman'. You know, it has its connotations in our society.” (2005-11-25) This phenomena is described by Pernilla Ouis, who claims that there is a mentality of blaming women for what is done to them in Middle Eastern societies, especially when the crime is of a sexual nature (Ouis, 2005:42-43).

It is well established that many women in the Lebanese society, through the structure of patriarchy and the role of the family, are constructed as social and economical dependants of their husbands and male relatives. (Joseph, 2000:123-124) In the case of political and economic participation, women tend to lack resources – Palestinian refugee women specifically, since many drop out of school at an early age. (Wafa'a Ahmed, 2005-12-05) According to Lina Abou-Habib at CRTD-A, the economy in the Lebanese society is gendered in a way that has an impact on the woman's position within the household. (2005-11-25) The patriarchal norm gives fathers, older brothers or paternal uncles the economic and social responsibility for young women until they marry. After they marry, husbands take over this role. This way, the patriarchal system both cares and controls family members. (Joseph, 2000:122-125; in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:4) Of course, many do not live according to this norm – women can be sole providers for large families. However, the gendered economic relations can be suspected to affect women's possibilities to influence decisions in households where they do not contribute economically. This leads to inequality in the families, which in turn affect the society. To change the situation for women, a democratisation of family relations, both economically and socially, has to take place. Zoya Rouhana from KAFA:

“We have a very clear patriarchal society. It demonstrates itself in many aspects of society. And we believe that if one do not, if you do not find democratic relations in the family, which is the basic core of society, we will not be able to do anything in the society. This is our belief. That's why we are focusing in the issues of personal relationships.” (2005-12-06)

In spite of the prevalence of disempowerment and domestic violence, gender equality is not on the political agenda in Lebanon today according to both Lina Abou-Habib (2005-11-25) and Wadad Chakhtoura (2005-11-30). Even when women take part in the formal political arenas, “they are not carrying an equality agenda”. The elected women in parliament are there “on the basis of patriarchy and confessional representation”, being wives or sisters of established politicians. (Lina Abou-Habib, 2005-11-25; see also Joseph, 2000:127) As a consequence, there are very limited tools to work through formal politics for those who wish to improve women's situation.

3.1.3 The Personal Status Laws and Citizenship

In our conversations with the various representatives of the organisations, the issue raised most often was the delegation of power over the personal status law to

the religious authorities. This legal practise was variously referred to in the interviews as family law, personal status law and personal status code, but we will throughout this text use the term personal status law. The question of the personal status law was seen both as a problem in itself, and as a cause of an impeded emancipation for women generally. It was mentioned in the context of citizenship-legislation, domestic violence, and political and economical inequality. As we shall see, all these issues are intimately connected, and it became apparent that the interviewees generally saw this as functions of the confessional structure of the Lebanese state and the pervasive organizing principle of patriarchy. To understand this complex issue, we will begin by discussing the principles of Lebanese citizenship.

Citizenship: According to the Constitution, while being a citizenship of the state, the Lebanese citizenship is at the same time tied to religious affiliation. There can be no formal political or national identity that is not also confessional. Therefore, in all practical aspects, political-rights and citizenship-rights are channelled through the confessional communities, which make the question of citizenship-rights subject to the decisions of religious authority. (Davis, 1997:150-151, Joseph, 2000:128) Moreover, inspired by French legal tradition at the time of the construction of the citizenship-laws, and in correspondence with cultural norms in the Lebanese society, citizenship was constructed on principles of patrilineality (Davis, 1997:137, 144-146; Joseph, 2000:128-129). This means that minor children are given the citizenship of their father. Women can, if they choose, have the citizenship of their husbands. A Lebanese woman can on the other hand not pass her citizenship on to her non-Lebanese husband, or to her children. (Davis, 1997:146)

The fact that women can not give their citizenship to spouse or children obviously hurt the whole family in cases when a Lebanese woman marries a foreign man. In the case of the woman, since it she is not a citizen to the full extent but dependant on male relatives/husbands, political participation becomes harder. In the case of the children, they are left with no citizenship if their father leaves the family – they are denied full citizenship rights in the only society they ever lived in. (Brochure: *My Nationality, a right for me and my family*) This discrimination against women with respect to citizenship is not unique for Lebanon. Throughout the Middle East, women are denied full citizenship, as a consequence of patriarchal principles dominating citizenship laws. (Davis, 1997:150) The question of a non-gendered citizenship-law is therefore something that the women's organisations work with on a regional level, as is the case of the Nationality Campaign. (Lina Abou-Habib, 2005-11-25; Brochures: *My Nationality, a right for me and my family*; CRTD-A: *For Social Justice and Gender Equality*) In sum, by placing questions of citizenship under the jurisdiction of religious authority, the Lebanese state has carried the principle of patrilineal kinship into the codes and practices of Lebanese citizenship (Joseph, 2000:132). Many of the interviewees asserted that the very delicate balance of power between the sects inscribed in the Constitution, and the fact that religious leaders all want to keep their power in these matters, makes a change of the

citizenship-laws and the Constitution very hard to achieve. The victims of this are the women, the children, and the foreigners, particularly the Palestinians.

The personal status law: Because the state has delegated legal authority over personal matters to the religious institutions, there is no unified civil personal status law in Lebanon today. Instead, each sect is given the authority to devise their own personal status law and establish religious sectarian courts, and citizens are required by the Constitution to follow the law of their sect (Davis, 1997:141; Joseph, 2000:129-130). Consequently, in matters very crucial to women and children, clerics of the patriarchal monotheistic religions remain in power in questions regarding marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Because of the consistent discrimination of women in personal matters in all the religious traditions, there is no equality before the law between women and men in Lebanon.⁴ (Davis, 1997:150; Joseph, 2000:131; Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06; Wadad Chakhtoura, 2005-12-30) Zoya Rouhana at Kafa expressed this:

“Yes, if you take violence in all its aspects and definitions, not only the physical one [...] you can say that every woman in Lebanon is a potential to be a victim of violence, in its broader aspect, because there are many, many levels in which [...] these laws inflict violence on women.” (2005-12-06)

This is to say, not only can family members legally physically abuse women, men rape their wives, and honour crimes sometimes be legitimized according to the religious laws. Women are also discriminated against in economic- and family matters and bereft their right of participation in matters which concern them, which in it self is a form of violence. (Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06)

Wadad Chakhtoura, Rafif Rida Sidawi and Maya Bou-Ayache, and Zoya Rouhana all emphasized that creating a civil personal status code, which applies to everybody regardless the confession, is imperative in a gender perspective. The biggest obstacles for change were identified as the prevalence of patriarchal power-structures in families and religious authorities, and the confessional political system. Since a few years back there are, according to Zoya Rouhana, discussions among the religious authorities to change this discriminating practice, but until now, not much has happened. (Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06) In addition, according to Maya Bou-Ayache and Rafif Rida Sidawi at LECORVAW (2005-11-29), the weakness of the state is a key factor in explaining the bad state of women’s rights in Lebanon. Because the state has stepped down in matters of the private, the rights that women *do* have in e.g. matters of alimony are not being enforced.

Nevertheless, regarding the personal status law and gender equality in general, there are two pictures here. According to many of our interviewees, the mentality of the population has in many ways developed far beyond the conservative laws.

⁴ Of course, as both Wadad Chakhtoura Zoya Rohana mentioned, and Suad Joseph describes (2000:131-12), there is difference between the sects as to how their family laws discriminate women. Still, the general picture is that women always come out as losers in comparison with men.

“[...] the level of the Lebanese women is far more progressive than the laws. Especially the personal status codes.” “[...] we have maybe the highest level of education among woman in the Arab world. And at the same time, other Arab countries have made some changes in their personal status codes, were in Lebanon we don’t because this confessional conflict exists.” (Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06)

Moreover, since cross-confessional marriage is in many cases not accepted by the clergy, young couples go to Europe, to France, Cyprus or Turkey, to get married. (Maya Bou-Ayache, translating for Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29) It is apparent that since the laws do not mirror the opinion of the population, people find a way around it in this case.

3.1.4 Confessionalism, Citizenship, and the Palestinian Refugees

When in a Lebanese context discussing questions of democracy, human rights in general, and citizenship rights in particular, one can not ignore the special situation of the Palestinian refugees. Also in relation to social belonging and political identity, the case of the refugees must be treated with special interest, since being a Palestinian in Lebanon usually means to be a ‘non-citizen’, a stateless. According to the Lebanese Constitution, Palestinian refugees resident in Lebanon are classified as foreigners. For reasons explained above, this makes marriage with Lebanese residents outside the community problematic, especially in cases of a Palestinian man and a Lebanese woman. Furthermore, naturalization – that is, being given Lebanese citizenship – is much harder for Palestinians than for other foreigners. This is not a hypocritical practice of the Lebanese government; this is the official policy of all the members of the League of Arab States⁵ – the refugees are to remain stateless, so that they can return to a future Palestine as Palestinians. (Davis, 1997:168-169) However, the policy is implemented differently in different countries. The refugees are entitled to civil rights and the right to work under the League of Arab States provisions, but this is not the case in Lebanon. Palestinians living in Lebanon do not have the full right to own property, nor full rights to work. (Davis, 1997:165-167) According to Rosemary Sayigh, there is a majority of the Lebanese population wanting to give civil rights to the Palestinians⁶, but the refugees become a pawn in the political conflict between the governments of Israel and Lebanon, a conflict that up until the spring of 2005 was further complicated by the Syrian presence in Lebanon (Sayigh, 2001:100-103).

⁵ In this case, we wish to make a reservation, because this fact may very well have been changed since 1997, when Davis published his book. However, to the best of our knowledge, and according to the Palestinian refugees we have talked to, naturalization is at least as hard now as it was in 1997.

⁶ According to the survey cited by Sayigh, as much as 68 percents wants to give the Palestinians civil rights.

Probably more importantly still, even when overlooking the international politics considerations, the confessional political structure of the Lebanese state obstructs any ambition to integrate the Palestinians into the polity. Because political resources and representation is distributed according to how big the religious sects are, an inclusion of the predominantly Sunni-Muslim Palestinians into the citizenry would lead to a break of the delicate political equilibrium between the sects. The wish to maintain *status quo* among those in power seems to prevent any progressive development in this issue. (Wafa'a Ahmed, 2005-12-05; Davis, 1997:173; Sayigh, 2001:100-102)

Obviously, all this leads to a high level of unemployment and major economic problems among Palestinian women and men. It also deprives them of any tools to influence the formal political arenas, to have a fruitful communication with the rest of society, and any democratic ways of affecting their own situation in relation to the rest of Lebanon. As an effect, this leads to a sense of frustration and despair among the Palestinians. (Wafa'a Ahmed, 2005-12-05)

The same structures of patriarchy and the role of the family which impedes gender equality in the rest of Lebanon, also applies to the Palestinian group, and the same discriminating personal status laws are being used. The problems with lack of participation for women and domestic violence are, according to Wafa'a Ahmed, prevalent also among Palestinians. However, from our understanding of the interview with Wafa'a Ahmed at Najdeh Association, as well as from other conversations with refugees in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, an additional factor seems to shape the struggle for democratisation of gender relations: the binding loyalty to the group. The effect becomes clear in the interview with Wafa'a Ahmed:

“[...] being a Palestinian NGO, our aim is the development of the Palestinian refugees communities in general, and in order to reach our goal we have the women as our priority. So our programmes are addressed to the women. You know, the women are an important part of our communities since they have the direct contact with all the community, with the children and with the men. And... so the goal is the empowerment of the Palestinian women”. (2005-12-05)

Thus, the empowerment of women is partly legitimised by referring to how this will favour the whole Palestinian community. As we see it, this can have two effects. Firstly, a struggle to democratize gender relations may be circumscribed by the boundaries of the Palestinian struggle: women's rights will always come second to the best of the group, and may be de-prioritized in times of hardship. (Joseph in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:37) Moreover, there are research that suggest that what is best for the group may not be up for democratic discussion. It may be authoritatively decided by the leaders of the group, or given by the necessity to uphold tradition. Fighting for women's rights may then even be seen as treachery to the group. (Graham-Brown, in Joseph & Slymovics, 2001:30; Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130) However, contrary to this effect, the prevalent view among the people we have talked to in the Palestinian camps is that the Palestinians are in a situation of conflict, even war. With the perspective that 'all

hands are needed' to fight for their cause, the 'frame' of the Palestinian struggle is used by Najdeh Association to widen the scope of what is up for negotiation, concerning gender roles and what is viewed as acceptable for women. Because of their work, which basically is to give young women education and training, the work of Najdeh Association is appreciated as helping and empowering the whole of the Palestinian community. In this perspective, even conservative parents can be persuaded to let their daughters leave the house or even the camp. (Wafa'a Ahmed, 2005-12-05) In this way Najdeh Association fills exactly that function of expanding democracy and redefining spaces and identities, which is the core of transversal politics.

In sum, the frame of the Palestinian cause may both circumscribe and legitimize a struggle for gender equality. We do not know which one of these effects are the strongest, but we had the impression that Najdeh Association successfully managed to empower the Palestinian women within the frame of strengthening the community as a whole.

3.2 Interaction with Society

In this section we will discuss how the organisations interact with the society. We will see what effects the structure of the Lebanese society has on the organisations, how they form their strategies to meet the specific context, and how this compares to the transversal ideal.

3.2.1 Relationship between the State and the Civil Society

In democratisation theory the civil society is seen as a crucial for democratic discussion. According to Eschle, transversally organised social movements can even challenge the traditional boundaries of what is public and what is private – in short what is political, and thereby expand democracy.

The confessional political structure and the fragile equilibrium between the different sect groups in the parliament are blocking secular and unifying political initiatives. Interests of the citizens must be negotiated and channelled through the sects. The absence of a strong state in Lebanon, and the delegation of services and responsibilities to the sects, makes the existence of a non-politicised civil society, where citizens can meet around common interests, very limited. The sphere of civil society has to a large extent been organised "by religiously identified agencies with the blessing and financial support of the state" (Joseph in Kaplan et al eds., 1999:175). The sectarian organisations have a great financial and political strength relative to the non-sectarian, poor organisations (Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29).

The civil society is also partly organised according to the principles of kinship. An example of this is the rise of so called 'family associations'. Registered as NGOs, but based upon kinship, they are offering services and economic security

by providing loans and political connections to their members, entering the sphere of civil society. Between 1991 and 1996 more than 500 family associations were legally recognised by the Lebanese government in Beirut alone (Joseph, 2000:120; Salem et al., 1996).

The organisations we interviewed for this study were all non-religious, and by extension non-political organisations, even though their agenda of gender equality is political in itself. It gives them independence from the state and from sects, but their independence was at the same time giving them limited access to political channels. This is also causing economic constraints, making their projects and activities dependent on donors. “As independent organisations we have lots of problems, because our survival is actually a challenge in itself” says Lina Abou-Habib, CRTD-A. (2005-11-25) Even though direct access to political influence is difficult, Rafif Rida Sidawi and Maya Bou-Ayache from LECORVAW say some interaction with state institutions is taking place. For example, they have initiated cooperation on the issue of domestic violence with the Ministry of Social Affairs. The organisations try to establish personal relationships with key persons with political influence, and through them push for certain ideas. It is a strategy also used towards the influential and powerful sub-state institutions like the sect courts when supporting battered women to get a divorce. (Maya Bou-Ayache, 2005-11-25; Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29)

The importance given to kin and sect for the individual’s identities can be suspected to make it very difficult to find a common space where dialogue and renegotiation of identities by transversal means is made possible. Moreover, the fragmentation of the civil society makes it difficult to create a public discussion on a national level. The political fragmentation and its strong religious connections with conservative mentalities – in short the confessionalism – is considered as main obstacles for advocating women’s rights, and complicates the work of the organisations.

3.2.2 Cooperation – Across some Boundaries but not all

In the politicised Lebanese civil society, the non-sectarian and non-political organisations are in themselves questioning the confessional political system, as well as the rigid and inflexible identities the confessional system is creating. Being non-sectarian means that they are not bound to a specific sect. Instead, they include all women regardless of sect. This does not however, mean that they can easily co-operate with organisations that are confessional. The principle of the organisation is what matters, and not the religious identity. This does not mean a denial of their religious identity, but as Lina Abou-Habib said:

“As a principle and as a matter of ethos [...] religion is not an issue. We are from different backgrounds, from different points of view, and for us, people with different points of views can actually work together!” (2005-11-25)

Wadad Chakhtoura expressed a similar view. LWDG's members come from different religious sects, with both believers and non-believers among them, but with a common ground of shared values and interests, religious affiliations could be put aside. (Wadad Chakhtoura, 2005-11-30)

Nira Yuval-Davis emphasised, when first introducing the transversal model, that transversal politics is not boundary free. There are limitations to the model, such as conflicts of interests that make dialogue impossible. Transversal politics is not possible in cases where conflicting interests are not reconcilable. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:130-131) A lack of dialogue between non-sectarian organisations and confessional organisations, with conflicting positions regarding the societal structure, is then a natural limitation of the transversal model itself. Networks were only formed with other non-sectarian and non-political organisations – organisations with which they share ideas and values. (Wadad Chakhtoura, 2005-11-30)

Nonetheless, at LECORVAW we also found that even the sharpest conflicting ideas were sometimes put aside, in order to find a solution. Even though being non-sectarian, and striving for a civil personal status law, they cooperated in certain cases with monasteries in order to protect and find the best help for battered women. (Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29) With this exception mentioned, co-operations between the organisations was built on a common issue of interest, based on a shared value, rather than the essentialist category of ethnic identity such as sectarian belonging. This is in line with the transversal politics model that “differentiates between social identities and social values”, and consequently “the boundaries of a transversal dialogue are determined by the message, rather than the messenger” (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:131) Creating a ‘secular space’ where women from different confessional groups can coexist and strive for common goals – allowing for shifting and negotiable identities as well as accept and appreciate differences – is a main function for transversal politics applied in religious polarised environments. (Yuval-Davis, 1997a:124, 132)

CRTD-A, LECORWAV and LWDG are engaged in a national network involving 7 organisations. The recent ‘Nationality Campaign’ was a regional and a national campaign for equal right to citizenship; Lina Abou-Habib from CRTD-A is expressing the terms of co-operation in the network with great correspondence to transversal ideals:

“The coalition [The Nationality Campaign] in this case is actually around the lowest common denominators, ok? So we all agree on what is the problem with nationality, what are the guiding principles and where we want to go. So it doesn't mean that [...] beyond it you have to agree on everything” (Lina Abou-Habib 2005-11-25)

Coming from slightly different backgrounds and with different knowledge, but sharing the same values and ideas on this specific issue, has a strong resonance with transversal ideals.

All the organisations were involved in different regional networks, such as Arab Women's Network, Aïcha and Arab Women Court. In an environment where they lack channels to directly influence the politics, the networks of social

movements seem to provide an alternative sphere where they can formulate their ideas and interests, gain more knowledge and learn from each others successes as well as failures. Together the movements find strategies to improve the status of women and their conditions in the different communities. For example, in Morocco the personal status codes have been radically changed. Through the Arab Women Court, attempts are made to move this experience from Morocco to other countries in the Arab world (Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06)

These networks between social movements also offer an alternative political space where dialogue and cooperation can include the otherwise excluded groups of Palestinians. Because of the fact that Palestinians are not allowed to form their own NGO:s in Lebanon, Palestinian NGOs by necessity include a number of Lebanese who work for the rights of the Palestinians. According to Wafa'a Ahmed, these Lebanese members feel strong solidarity and concern for the Palestinians. Consequently, dialogue and cooperation between individual Lebanese citizens and Palestinian refugees, as well as between social movements, can overcome the government's attempts to marginalize the Palestinian group and give them a tool for political influence.

3.2.3 Framing and Strategies

As mentioned before, the ideal model of transversal politics should work to expand democracy into all of life's arenas: the international field, the family, the economy. Moreover, the model is based on the view that the struggle to democratize gender-relations must be localized to those that are close to the problems: the local social movements. Consequently, the ideal strategies for women's social movement must be adapted to the situation at hand. (Eschle, 2000:129, 218) Parallel to this observation, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink argue that the 'frame' of an issue is important for how it is perceived by target audiences. The 'frame', that is, the rhetoric and concepts a social movement uses, must have a resonance with the discourses and concepts used by those it wants to influence, otherwise understanding may be blocked. (Keck & Sikkink, 1998:2, 17) In sum, context-sensitivity of framing is crucial for strategies to succeed. Judging from our interviews, it seems that the Lebanese women's social movement has indeed identified several problematic areas, and they challenge these problems in ways that are both context-sensitive and aimed to expand democracy, into family and economy.

The concrete problems, which we have identified above, are violence, a lack of political and economic participation, and the citizenship- and personal status laws which consistently discriminate women. The organisations blame these problems on traditional attitudes, patriarchy and the confessional political system. Hence, there are two levels of problem-analysis, one concrete and one structural, and the organisations design their strategies accordingly.

To begin, a communication with people on all levels of society seemed to be the general approach of the organisations. Most problems of women in Lebanon were partly attributed to a lack of awareness and a problem of 'mentality'.

Because of this, all the organisations held various kinds of awareness-raising activities, aimed at judges, politicians, social workers at the Ministry of social affairs, the police, and also ordinary women and men. However, the organisations differ in their strategies in terms of focus.

CRTD-A targets inequality and the participation-deficit among women in political and economical arenas. Firstly, this is done through education and training-programmes, which aim to provide individual women and women's groups with tools for economic independence. The LWDG works with awareness-raising campaigns and study-centres to achieve the same thing. Both organisations aim to democratize the relations within households through economic and educational empowerment of the women. (Lina Abou-Habib, 2005-11-25; Wadad Chakhtoura, 2005-11-30) As we have seen, the Najdeh Association in many respects work in the same way. However, where the Lebanese organisations talk in terms of gender-relations and the problems of inequality, Najdeh mainly talk in terms of improvements for the Palestinian community as a whole. There is a noticeable difference in framing here, one that it would be interesting to study further.

The problems of domestic violence are targeted by LECORVAW and KAFA. They both have an immediate goal of protecting victims of violence, and they do this by giving them legal counselling, and medical examinations to provide evidence of abuse. Thus, in the short run, both LECORVAW and KAFA work within the frame of the personal status laws. They try to use what protection the laws provide for women, and make the government follow up the enforcement of the law when it is in favour of the women. They also educate women about what the laws actually say with regard to violence, so that they can use it in their favour. On this level, it seems that the organisations frame the issue of domestic violence not as a matter of human rights, but as a health-issue or legal issue. (Maya Bou-Ayache, 2005-11-25, Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29) In relation to the population at large, LECORVAW and KAFA both use their practical knowledge of the problems of battered women to gain credibility and weight for their demands. Zoya Rouhana:

“In the issue of violence against women [...] it was easy to cooperate. All people accept the idea of fighting violence against women. [...] no-one can say ‘yes, I agree with violence against women’.” (2005-12-06)

Thusly, the social work works through the health-frame as a legitimization of these organisations's more politically charged analysis and pressure for change. (Maya Bou-Ayache, 2005-11-25; Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06) This is fully in line with what Keck & Sikkink observes: the health-frame is useful in that it can “bridge” divisions of class, religion, and ethnicity. (1998:198)

When reaching the structural level of problem-analysis and strategies, the organisations tended to change frames. In the long run, all the Lebanese organisations view a democratisation of gender-relations and reformation of citizenship- and personal status law as imperative, and they all see the interconnected structures of patriarchy and confessionalism as obstacles for

achieving this. According to Wadad Chakhtoura, the confessional structure blocks all progress concerning gender-relations: “Un changement politique est très importante pour la femme”.⁷ (2005-11-30)

Nevertheless, even though the organisations lobby for a more comprehensive change of the political structure, the most used frame seemed to be on the legal level. By establishing contacts with the Ministry of social affairs and open-minded or tolerant judges, LECORVAW and KAFA have opened up a discussion about the personal status laws. (Rafif Rida Sidawi, 2005-11-29; Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06) This discussion is held on the level of national legal practice. Towards the government on the other hand, emphasis is put on changing the laws by referring to the international human rights frame. The Lebanese state signed the CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) in 1997⁸, which makes it potentially vulnerable to what Keck & Sikkink describes as “accountability politics” (1998:24-25). Zoya Rouhana explained that the women’s organisations try to hold the Lebanese government accountable to the signature of the CEDAW, and also with regard to the concept of democracy. “[...] they will find themselves facing you internally, and also facing the west. To prove they’re democratic.”(Zoya Rouhana, 2005-12-06) In this way, “the west” is used as an audience to which the organisations can turn when democratic principles or human rights are violated, using “mobilization of shame” or “moral leverage” as a tool to put pressure on the government. (Keck & Sikkink, 1998:23-24) Sadly, according to Zoya Rouhana, the reservations Lebanon did when it signed the CEDAW “took all the sense out of the signature”. Even so, as Rafif Rida Sidawi stated, “Lebanon signs on them. Even if they don’t really practice, at least they did sign, and we can lobby for that.” (translated by Maya Bou-Ayache, 2005-11-29)

In conclusion, the Lebanese women’s organisations use of frames mirror the history of the women’s movement as a whole, where both a human rights frame and the health-frame have been used. (Keck & Sikkink, 1998:171-188) In Lebanon, the movement uses both frames, depending on the audience. We believe that the choice to use the health-frame is an effect of a conscious context-sensitivity in these movements, since ordinary people, with the social values and frames of reference sprung from the patriarchal structure, may discard the human rights-frame as ‘western’ ‘cultural imperialistic’ (Keck & Sikkink, 1998:195). Towards the government, which desires democratic legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, a human rights frame might be considered more useful.

⁷ i.e. “A political change is very important for the woman.”

⁸ CEDAW was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. According to it, signatory countries must adopt a principle of equality between men and women before the law, abolish all discriminatory laws, and adopt new laws which prohibit discrimination. (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>)

4 Conclusion

We have in this thesis described what five organisations in the Lebanese women's social movement identify as the most problematic issues for women in their society, and how the organisations deal with these issues. We have also tried to see how the Lebanese context affects the possibility of implementing the model of transversal politics, as described by Catherine Eschle and Nira Yuval Davis.

We have found that the combination of the confessional political system, informal structures of patriarchy, family and sect, and the formal implementation of the family- and citizenship-laws, appears to work effectively in constructing the different sects as each others 'others', and as rivals in competition for political and material resources. Consequently, not only do these structures and laws hurt women in the Lebanese society directly, but they would at first sight also seem to obstruct an effective joined struggle against them. You can be Lebanese and Christian catholic, or Lebanese and Druze, but you can not be both, and the social and political importance inscribed into religious belonging and kinship seems to make these categories very hard to disregard. This seems to make the existence of a common space, where democratic dialogue and re-negotiation of identities can take place, rather difficult to find. Eschle, Yuval-Davis and Young may be right in assuming that social groups only give the frame, within which the individual actively constructs her identity. Still, judging from the arguments of various researchers of the Lebanese context, such as Makdisi, Joseph and Krayyem, the Lebanese social frame is so narrow, and the options so limited, that this active construction of the individual identity appears to be of little practical significance for many.

However, the existence of the women's social movement proves that flexible identities, shared values and a common problem-analysis across social boundaries are indeed possible in Lebanon. Therefore, concerning the possibility of politics across confessional divisions, we are quite hopeful regarding the Lebanese society.

Generally, we would say that the organisations we have studied come quite close to implementing the transversal ideal of democracy across social boundaries. Even though small, poor and marginalized, we believe that they have potential to work as a tool for democratisation of the Lebanese society as a whole, in the way Eschle suggests that social movements should and can. Even though being separate organisations with slightly different agendas, the women and men involved are united by principles; they share ideas about what is wrong in society and what should be done about it. They cooperate and work through national and regional networks, where they address common problems and try to learn from each other.

With a rather sceptical but pragmatic attitude towards the state and sect-institutions, the organisations frame their issues in a way that shows considerable context-sensitivity. By being sensitive and flexible, they can adjust their strategies and rhetoric depending on the audience.

The organisations identify problems and obstacles for gender-equality in a way very similar to Eschle and Yuval-Davis. They see the power-structures of patriarchy and confessionalism as threatening democracy in both the public and the private sphere, and they target this on different levels. They try to democratize family-relations, economic relations and gender roles, which they all see as interconnected. According to both the organisations and to Joseph, the function of the patriarchal structure of the kin group is to both care for and control family members. This seems an important obstacle for democratisation of gender-relations. In the absence of a strong democratic state, the kin group may be the only source of protection for women. The organisations within the women's movement try to surmount this problem by empowering women themselves through economic independence and by working with state institutions to create social services. Moreover, by addressing the citizenship-legislation, they aim to democratize the relationship between the state and the individual, so that men and women can be equals before the law. Finally, they challenge and contest the confessional political structure by targeting the issue of the personal status law. By doing this, they try to expand democratic influence to an area that is now in the hands of patriarchal religious institutions. In sum, these organisations try to renegotiate and reconstruct what it means to be woman in Lebanon, and question the logics of confessionalism. Given the Lebanese context – a social and political environment marked by confessional differences – this is indeed a radical stance.

We would say that the Lebanese women's movement provides an interesting alternative political arena, as it can communicate horizontally with people in the community and thereby target issues that are banned from the political debate. As we have seen, dealing with issues of gender-equality on the formal political arena has proved very hard, as the confessional structure seems to block all political initiatives in this direction. In this respect, the organisations fill an extremely important democratic function. Even though being at the fore-front on the way to gender-equality in the Arab world, inequality still seems profound in the Lebanese society. Judging from our interviews, the women's social movement seems to work as a 'resistance' or counter balance, not only towards the state but also towards the existing power structures of sects and kin groups. Also in the case of the Palestinians, the movements function as a democratic arena is important. Since all formal democratic communication remains impossible for them, the civil society is their only tool for political influence.

The movement resonates strongly with transversalism when it challenges the border between the public and the private sphere, and by extension the ideas about what is political and what is not. Changing structures by expanding democracy – whether social or political or both – through a dialogue across differences is to 'do politics' the transversal way.

We wish the reader to note that this study is based on a rather limited material, and that our conclusions should be viewed in this light. One might view this thesis

as a pre-study for more thorough research of the civil society, in Lebanon, the Arab world and beyond. Moreover, our finding suggests several other interesting areas for further research. Concerning the situation of the Palestinian refugees, it would be interesting to study if social movements really can work as political channels towards governments and international institutions. Moreover, the movement's role as democratic arenas within the Palestinian communities should be examined.

The issue of personal status- and citizenship laws has a profound effect on all Lebanese residents, both Lebanese citizens and Palestinians, women and men. It is therefore interesting in several perspectives – human rights studies, democratisation theory and gender studies.

That a women's movement can act as an alternative political arena and overcome social and geographical boundaries is an interesting suggestion. We would especially propose further research on how (and if) the Moroccan experience concerning the changed personal status laws is 'moved' to other Arab countries. If this move can indeed be done through the women's movements, it would confirm Eschle's belief that international transversal dialogue is able to have impact on local political arenas and even democratize family relations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude towards Lina Abou-Habib, Wafa'a Ahmed, Ghida Anani, Maya Bou-Ayache, Wadad Chakhtoura, Zoya Rouhana, and Rafif Rida Sidawi. They took time from their busy schedules to share their thoughts, ideas, and knowledge with us. We would also like to thank Raji bin Amin for all his help and generosity during our stay in Beyrouth. Thanks also to Henrik Fält for proofreading!

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Information material and brochures

CRTD-A:

My nationality a right for me and my family

CRTD-A: For Social Justice and Gender Equality

Websites

MACMAG-GLIP: www.macmag-glip.org (2006-01-18)

LECORVAW: www.lebanesewoman.org (2006-01-18)

UN – Division for the Advancement of Women:

www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw (2006-01-18)

Interviews

Lina Abou-Habib, Collective for Research & Training on Development – Action (CRTD-A), 2005-11-25.

Wafa'a Ahmed, Najdeh Association, 2005-12-05.

Wadad Chakhtoura, Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering (LWDG), 2005-11-30.

Maya Bou-Ayache, Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women (LECORVAW), 2005-11-25; 2005-11-29.

Zoya Rouhana, KAFA, 2005-12-06.

Rafif Rida Sidawi, Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women (LECORVAW), 2005-11-29.

Appendix

1. The organisation

What is the purpose of _____?

- Objectives
- Goals
- Activities
- Strategies

Who do you address, who is your focus group?

- Do you reach out to all religious groups?
- Immigrants
- Palestinians
- People in rural areas and poor people

How is the organisation structured?

- Founder/s
- Members
- President
- Board

How do you work?

- Does the board give the frames for the work?
- Can members initiate projects in the organisation?

Do you have members from different sect groups?

How do you finance your work?

- Do you feel that the way you are financed affect your work?
- Limit options?

Do you work or cooperate with other organisations?

- Women organisations
- International organisations
- Other organisations

In what issues?

What advantages/disadvantages do you see in cooperating with other organisations?

Do you find strength in building coalitions with others?

- problems?

2. The Lebanese society

What do you consider to be the biggest issues facing women in Lebanon today?

What changes are needed?

What obstacles do you see for these changes to take place?

3. Feminism/The Political

Do you think your work can lead to political or social change?

Do you see your work as political?

Are men included in your organisation?

Do you see your organisation as a feminist organisation?

How do you think your organisation is viewed in the Lebanese society?

- Positive
- Negative
- Controversial