

Sexuality and Social Media in Lebanese Politics

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Diana Moukalled is a veteran journalist that has extensive experience in both traditional and new media.



Brief Analysis

At the beginning of the year, one of the members of the Lebanese Parliament had previously voted for singer Myriam Klink during the presidential election session, causing the whole session to erupt in laughter, with some nearly divulging their own fantasies about the ‘sexy singer’. Today, however, she is being ridiculed throughout Lebanon and faces the serious possibility of going to prison.

At the beginning of March, the Lebanese Information and Justice Ministers, Melhem Riachi and Salim Jreissati, banned the circulation of a video clip by Klink, who became famous by virtue of her bold and provocative photos and videos. Hours after the video was posted, the ministers imposed fines on any person who shared the video on social media. But the video, and the controversy surrounding it, spread fast.

In spite of the ban’s limited effectiveness in the digital age, it is supported by a powerful argument based on the presence of a child in an erotic video. No person, regardless of how open-minded they are, can condone this kind of flagrant violation. Certainly everyone has the right to produce risqué content, but involving children in something sexual and clearly designed for an adult audience is a violation of the child’s innocence.

This article does not seek to defend in any way a video clip that exploits a young child, but is rather an attempt to pause and think about the excessive duality through which we interact with one another regarding women and their rights. Women have every right to be bold in their artistic expressions, even if their art is reprehensible.

The problem is that the controversy does not stop with the child’s exploitation. When one lives in a country like Lebanon, replete with social and political contradictions, it is hard not to look at the broader context in which this ban occurred and how it has been treated by the media. Under the banner of protecting childhood, phrases about the ban have begun creeping into official discourse that are often used when women appear in various kinds of entertainment media. Calls to “protect morals and public decency, the image of women, religious values, and the conservatism of society” are being repeated on social media as part of an aggressive campaign against Klink, all while turning a blind eye to her male companion in the video, singer Jad Khalife. While outraged viewers have resoundingly rejected Klink, they failed to do the same to her male partner in the deplorable video.

Even though this story will run its course, it will surely become the latest chapter in the repetitive saga about

consumerism and the place of women in societies – split between biased laws and conservative traditions on the one hand, and a yearning for liberalization and openness on the other.

This conversation is not limited to a specific country; however, in Lebanon, it is particularly relevant given that the country is renowned for its open-mindedness (even though its path towards implementing just laws remains long and arduous).

Exactly two months ago, a similar situation arose, however it dealt more frankly with the image of women and the acceptable limits of audacity, particularly in public domains such as that of the media. Against the backdrop of an entertainment program that hosted women to talk about their sexual desires and fantasies, official agencies, particularly those from the Lebanese Parliament, mobilized with some members calling for an end to these types of shows altogether, which were described by the Ministry of Information as contrary to public decency. In the meantime, ministers and members discussed the necessity of preserving the image of Lebanese women.

The irony is that members who mobilized against a program showing women discussing their desires refused to pass a bill criminalizing sexual harassment against women, which, according to the member who proposed the law, was met with sarcasm and contempt by his colleagues who ultimately rejected the idea without discussion. But after criticism campaign that confronted the negligence of Representatives, Saad Hariri's government has, on the International Women Day, enacted a draft law which criminalizes sexual harassment. However, the law will not become effective until it is approved by the General Authority of the House of Representatives, and this will be another challenge to the law.

The numerous violations that Lebanese women suffer from that are supported by both law and society are not new phenomena. Lebanese women endure chronic injustices, including a lack of equality in personal status law, an inability to pass citizenship on to their children, bias in economic law, and some of the weakest political representation in the world. From this standpoint, it appears that the ban on entertainment programs and video clips is just the latest effort to continue tightening the legal and societal grip on women.

In reality, looking at women and their place in public and private life in both Lebanon and the region at large, whether in the media or other domains, is just another permutation of the complex problems inherited by the Arab mind. It is unfortunate that, in spite of all of the positive ways in which technological advancement and the communications revolution have created new room for discussion, an increase in diversity of opinion, and the innovation of online campaigns for just issues, they did not lead to the attitude development that we had hoped for, especially as it relates to women's rights.

As a journalist with over two decades of experience, I have participated in a number of professional training sessions in the region to discuss terms used when covering violence against women. I am always shocked by the fact that there is a significant portion of young men and women who know full well the repercussions of sensationalism, namely the ways in which publishing demeaning and stereotypical content reflects negatively on women's rights, but go ahead and resort to it anyways. Speaking with some of them, I was surprised by the extent to which they defended these methods as totally justified, arguing that new media demands it because we live in a competitive time that requires us to attract the highest number of followers possible. This explains the proliferation of headlines like "Nights of Sex in ISIS's Bedrooms," which has converted the conversation about the atrocious violence of ISIS members systematically raping Yazidi women girls into a sensationalist spectacle.

To be clear, this defective form of journalism, popularized mainly by social media, in no way cancels out the positives produced by open communication, which has opened up space for new voices and made discussions about a host of issues widely accessible – particularly those related to women's rights. Numerous online campaigns have also helped propagate positive awareness of other important issues.

Currently, I am betting on the success of modern media because traditional media – despite its greater power and influence – cannot publish positive, liberal, or secular content about women unless the state, political parties, or news agencies actually believe in women’s issues. And by this I mean true belief, not just that which is utilized to improve their public relations image.

Unfortunately, this is simply not the way of the state right now.

Luckily, the internet, in all of its domains, currently accepts any gatherings or personalities that call for change and equality. In contrast, the state or the ruling authority in Arab societies has not yet taken a positive, united stance on women, thus subjecting them and their media presence to the official position of each state.

To be sure, the rights granted to women vary from one Arab country to another. As a result, images of women vary widely among Arab communities in spite of the fact that they share commonalities related to both religion and sect. Indeed, this variation has increased over the past few years in light of fierce wars, crises, and the counter attacks waged by dictatorial governments and extremist groups against Arab Spring supporters.

Making the position of women more equitable and rational remains a thorny process and will surely be impeded by distressing obstacles at times. It is in this instance that we replace cruel reality with a free and open cyber universe, which has both a restitutive dimension and the real capacity to put pressure on our reality and change the patriarchal structure of social and political institutions.

Nonetheless, the internet is a double-edged sword in that women’s indecency online is by no means limited to the actions of Miryam Klink. There are men in our patriarchal society who reinforce this image as well to strengthen their positions of supremacy. Regrettably, until the desired balance between men and women is achieved, we will keep talking about the singer’s provocative video.



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