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***Book Review: Lebanese Women at the Crossroads Caught between Sect and Nation*¹**

Manal Al Natour²

“Women are caught between sect and nation in Lebanon, due to the dual legal system and relational citizenship rights” (xviii-xix) is the bottom line of Nelia Hyndman-Rizk’s book *Lebanese Women at the Crossroads Caught between Sect and Nation* (Lexington 2020). Hyndman-Rizk addresses the challenge to martial freedom for Lebanese women. In Lebanon children and spouses are denied citizenship rights when Lebanese women are married to foreigners; and therefore, they are at risk of statelessness.

The national debate on gender equality and the marriage contract moved Hyndman-Rizk to examine the implications of Lebanon’s consociational system of political and legal pluralism for women’s rights. In *Lebanese Women at the Crossroads Caught between Sect and Nation*, she specifically asks if secular citizenship is the key to improving women’s rights in Lebanon? Using in-person interviews, online surveys, and historical and ethnographic research conducted over a seven-year period, Hyndman-Rizk investigates the centrality of the division between religious and civil law, and gender inequality in Lebanon. She further explores “how women’s rights activists sought to transform Lebanese society, politically and socially, to bring about civil rights and women’s rights” (xviii). More specifically she looks at the following issues: online/offline activism, the campaign for a domestic violence law, the women’s nationality campaign, the women’s quota in parliament, intersectional campaigns, such as the #YouStink movement, and the campaign for civil marriage reform.

Building on the social movement literature and the Middle Eastern gender politics literature, *Lebanese Women at the Crossroads Caught between Sect and Nation* situates the research question within the timeframe that corresponds with the Arab Spring and the uprising built on Lebanon’s garbage crisis movement of 2015. Hyndman-Rizk addresses how women were in the frontlines of the movement, leading, participating, and promoting nonviolence resistance against corruption and injustice. In her discussion she takes a social movement theory perspective to examine the role of women’s movements, within the Arab Spring, and the intersectional nature of women’s rights and civil rights campaigns in processes of social change (5).

The book is divided into two major sections. The first part of the book includes an examination of the political and legal origins as well as the foundations of the Lebanese consociational system while the second part addresses the rise of the Lebanese women’s movement and a new wave of activism, which accelerated after 2011. In the formation section, Chapter Two provides a historical

¹ Hyndman-Rizk, N. (2020). *Lebanese women at the crossroads: caught between sect and nation*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

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overview of Lebanon's demographic amalgamation since the Ottoman Empire and its long exposure to the West. The third chapter reviews Lebanon's family law system and its plural personal status codes from the Ottoman times till modern day.

Looking specifically at the critical role of new media technologies in facilitating new social movements, Chapter Four, included in the second section of the book, compares online and offline women's rights activism and examines movements that employ both modes of social mobilization. Findings in the chapter suggest that iterative dynamism existed between the two modes of activism that led to significant reforms. The fifth chapter discusses the intersection between women's rights campaigns and broader social and political movements such as the garbage movement. While these campaigns seem disparate, findings stated in the chapter suggest that fighting for political reforms improve women's representation and address gender-based violence. Alternatively, Chapter Six focuses specifically on the fight for civil marriage in Lebanon and the fight to introduce a comprehensive personal status code. This topic, by far, is one of the most contentious issues facing women's rights in Lebanon because civil marriage does not exist in Lebanon. Civil marriage is established on a contract between two adults to build marital relationship between them and is usually secular. All marriages in Lebanon must be registered with the Vital Statistics Bureau and performed by a religious authority in order to be recognized by the state. Those who are interested in civil marriage are forced to travel to a different country in order to marry. The civil marriage national debate was ignited with the recognition of Lebanon's first civil marriage contract in 2013 as a new generation of activists and young couples sought court recognition of individual cases of civil marriage. In concluding the book, Hyndman-Rizk identifies, in Chapter Seven, Lebanon's plural legal system as the major factor restricting women's rights in Lebanon.

Indeed, Hyndman-Rizk offers, Lebanese women are caught between their religious affiliation and their citizenship status, which renders them stateless, deprives them of nationality rights, and restricts their marriage and divorce rights. Hyndman-Rizk suggests that secularism, or the separation between religion and politics, does not apply to the Middle Eastern context. She argues that as a Western construct, it assumes that class is the main form of social division. Citing Charrad (2001) and Joseph (1996) she recognizes that kin-based groupings, and not religious groups, who have influenced state formation processes, are one of the major hurdles to advancing women's rights in the Middle East. While the secularization thesis holds that modernization is coupled with secularization, the Middle East, in Hyndman-Rizk's opinion is an exception and secular governance experiments have largely failed (e.g., the Baathist regimes of Iraq and Syria).

Lebanese Women at the Crossroads Caught between Sect and Nation offers the first scholarly account of Lebanese women's rights activism published in English and in a book format. The book offers the academic community of teachers, students, and scholars insights into works of major but often marginalized voices and enhances understanding of women's rights and activism in Lebanon. By discussing women's rights and activism over a long historical range, it highlights how Lebanese personal status law is central to and intertwined with political power and oppression. Likewise, the book makes a great contribution in highlighting the emergence of online activism as a valid form of social mobilization for social and political impact.