

Shia Women in Lebanon

Unique Identity and Endless Struggle



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A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

تواریخُ مُتْقَاطِعَة حِصَّة الشیعة منها فی لبنان

UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) is undertaking a history project in Lebanon entitled A Cross Section of a History. This project will create a space to explore and deepen understanding of the socio-political histories of specific communities within Lebanon - including the Shia, among others - to trace and explore their historical dynamics until today. Micro-level histories of individuals, families, and towns in Lebanon will be addressed, out of the belief that examination of these various histories will show the mosaic of personal and collective experiences of communities in Lebanon over history.

The title of the project "a cross section of a history" embodies this mission: by focusing on specific elements of Lebanon's collective, cacophonous history, we aim to illuminate unique and collective dynamics, identities, and transformations that help to explain the Lebanon we are seeing today. This project aims to directly engage with community members around Lebanon and in the diaspora, as well as academics and experts. The outputs of the project will be a research report and collections of archival material.



Beirut, 2023
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**Bundesamt für
Auswärtige Angelegenheiten**

German Federal Foreign Office

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Foreign Office.

This book was produced and published thanks to financial
support from the German Federal Foreign Office.

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Introduction

Throughout the annals of history, human societies have borne witness to myriad changes and developments that left an indelible impact on their economic, social, political, and cultural fabric. This narrative extends to the diverse communities within the contemporary geographic confines of Lebanon, including the Shia community, and has been whose influence has been particularly profound in affecting the female members of the community. The evolution of Shia women's reality over time has reverberated across all spheres of their engagements and multifaceted roles within various domains, significantly shaping the overarching perceptions stemming from diverse societal frameworks.

In epochs past, Lebanese Shia women, akin to their counterparts in other sects, found themselves predominantly relegated to confined roles within family and productive realms and tethered to the authority of men. Historical records only sporadically highlight the presence of distinguished Shiite female figures who emerged with specific roles, a pattern that persists until the conclusion of the Ottoman era and the subsequent reforms within the empire. The era of the French Mandate in Lebanon ushered in a notable literary

surge, exerting substantial influence on Shia women and propelling them forward across educational, social, literary, cultural, and economic spheres. This progression continued as they later actively engaged in political arenas, solidifying their presence in this space during the civil war and persisting into contemporary times.

The intensification of the politicization of the Shia sect, which developed in the early 1960s, reached its zenith in the 1980s, and continues until today notably under the movements of Amal and Hezbollah, exerted a profound impact on the reality of Shia women in Lebanon. This influence is manifested in their appearance, behavior, culture, and diverse roles, all of which were moved towards religious modesty and conservativeness aligned with movements resulting from the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This stood in contrast to the popular role of Shia women, in which they have showcased a robust presence in both party and civil activities.

The evolving landscape in Lebanon, especially among the Shia populace, has had implications for personal status issues due to legislative frameworks lagging behind societal developments. This led to injustices against women in Lebanon in general, but specifically against Shia women, sparking resistance among the community against such inequities through individual initiatives or organized associations which forms the core focus of this research.

This research addresses a significant gap in existing scholarly efforts which often focus narrowly on specific aspects of the history of Shia women or incorporate them within the broader context of Lebanese women in general. The significance of this research lies in its illumination of the comprehensive history of Shiite

women and elucidating the transformations in their circumstances across social, religious, political, and economic realms over different historical periods. The objective of this research has been to construct the most accurate depiction possible of the evolving historical reality of Lebanese Shia women up to the present day.

This research encompasses the historical period from the inception of Shiism to the present day, with a focus on developments from the end of Ottoman rule due to the stability of the general reality of Shiite women during that period. Geographically, it spans regions historically inhabited by Shiites within the current Republic of Lebanon, concentrating on the South, the Bekaa, and Mount Lebanon. It is organized into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The initial chapter delves into the historical background of Shia women, encompassing the French Mandate and the early twentieth century. The subsequent chapter explores their lives from this point onwards until the Lebanese Civil War began in 1975, while the third third chapter covers the chronological trajectory from the start of the war to the present moment. The concluding chapter specifically addresses personal status laws and their impact on Shia women.

In terms of research methodology, the study predominantly employed a historical approach and gathered data from diverse sources such as books, newspapers, journals, and online repositories. This information is presented and analyzed through a descriptive-analytical lens to comprehend the contributions of Shiite women to their evolving reality.

Conclusion

Throughout history, Shia women aligned themselves with political parties, undergoing trials with secular or nationalist ones in the mid-twentieth century advocating for the separation of religion from the state. However, this did not secure a platform for effecting desired transformations regarding their political vision and demands for complete equality. Shia women then shifted to engage with Islamic movements, represented by the Amal and Hezbollah movements, but they ultimately faced similar outcomes. These movements have in turn reproduced traditional values without embracing a new discourse, perpetuating a patriarchal and male-dominated structure that discriminates against and inflicts violence upon women. The majority of these parties do not prioritize women's issues and instead marginalize women to stereotypical functions. Despite efforts, "Islamic feminism" has not succeeded in reducing the patriarchal control and focus of the scene and discourse.

In the present period, there has been an undeniable transformation among a significant number of Shia women across various facets when compared to previous decades in Lebanon. In recent years, Shia women in Lebanon have pursued enhanced education, university attendance, and employment

while simultaneously exhibiting a resurgence of religious values evident in attire and behavior. However, they still grapple with traditional gender roles, contending with a patriarchal Lebanese system that diminishes women's status, subjugates them, and hinders the utilization of their capabilities in decision-making positions, reflecting the broader condition of women in the country.

This research comprehensively discussed the reality of Shiite women throughout history up to the present day across various fields, including religious, political, social, and economic aspects. The chronological exploration presented societal roles, notable women, and their contributions; allowed for a focus on the conditions of Shia women during the civil war, with its changing circumstances and women's activities; and highlighted the role of Shia women's political movements and participation in the present period. The dedicated focus on the personal status laws allowed for a detailed analysis of the gendered and religious injustice embedded in the personal status laws.

This research encountered challenges related to historical data about Shiite women's reality before the French Mandate, as the bulk of existing research focuses on men during that period, as women were rarely addressed and primarily confined to domestic, agricultural, and caregiving spheres. Ultimately, this research strove for comprehensiveness and objectivity in presenting facts and information, and aims to inspire further diversified studies on Shia women in Lebanon without reducing them or writing them out of history.