

War and the Battle of Lebanese Television over Gender

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Abstract : The effects of the civil war on Lebanese women have been challenging to conceptualize. For some, war is a liberating and empowering force for women, while for others it is one that subjugates women and disempowers them in new ways. Scholars have explored the impact on the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) on women in the fields of labor history, political activism and literary production. In all these arenas, women's role and visibility were contested and negotiated in diverse ways. But probably the most visible arena where this contestation took place was television. Dramatized entertainment series were crucial sites where fictional women battled out the gender question, and which reflected and participated in the negotiations of gender politics. Even more stunningly, actual television stations became part of this battle through the plots and portrayals of women that they created. The state-backed Tele-Liban (TL) peddled patriarchal articulations of gender that directly competed with the edgy vision of liberated, independent women on the pirate Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC). This presentation explores how LBC used gender to distinguish its brand against the retrograde TL programming. Television series are an important medium for creating, testing and reenacting gender politics. They are even more consequential in another way. They are the sites where a dramatic shift in the relationship between Arab television and Arab publics—from benign neglect of public concerns towards engagement with audiences—took place for the first time. As this shift is at the heart of why Arab media was seen as a participant in the Arab uprisings, it is important to explore the roots of the shift in the dramas and comedy series of the mid-1980s Lebanese television. This presentation argues that television battles over gender were consequential and need serious consideration as sites of unexpected meaning.

Keywords : gender, Lebanon, television, war, women

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